REDESIGNING AN EFFECTIVE PATHWAY TO CONSUMER LOYALTY

FOR SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

by

Stephen P. Panczak

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Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Liberty University, School of Business

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Abstract

The qualitative case study aimed to study the impact of leadership behaviors on delivering hospitality frontline employee services to customers to sustain consumer loyalty and gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the South Florida hospitality and tourism industry. The flexible design allowed the researcher to develop specific research questions while focusing on the problem statement, which addressed the potential inability of U.S. business leaders in service-related industries to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage for the organizations. The researcher selected a highly successful South Florida luxury hotel resort, and twenty-nine professionally diversified participants were interviewed in person during this study. Each participant was asked eight semi-structured interview questions about their experiences at the resort or previous hospitality experiences. The qualitative concepts of bracketing and triangulation used in data collection enabled the researcher to develop an increase of objectivity about the participants. Through this case study, the researcher discovered that hospitality leadership must ensure employees are engaged with their jobs; such actions should help reduce employee turnover and develop a strong culture of employer-employee commitment (Figure 1). Furthermore, this qualitative research discovered the five new critical themes of 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) developing and maintaining a caring organizational culture. Furthermore, this case study proved to fill the gaps in research knowledge on redesigning a practical pathway to customer loyalty for sustainable competitive advantage.

Keywords: customer loyalty, competitive advantage, employee engagement, leadership

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Heavenly Father, who gave me the courage, wisdom, and persistence to achieve this personal and professional long-term goal. There were numerous challenges along the way, and after many prayers in times of despair, the Lord always helped me find the answers. I thought about giving up this academic endeavor many times and knew His Grace would take me in the right direction. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my family, who has endured five years of canceled events, weekend projects, and just being my sounding board. Thank you for your words of encouragement and sacrifice during this journey. I would not have survived this journey without family love and support.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: Introduction to the Study

This qualitative case study explored current literature research articles regarding identifying and improving customer satisfaction and overall brand loyalty for service-related entities. One leading indicator evaluated was the correlation between targeted elements of leadership behaviors and the subsequent impact on customer loyalty. The specific problem addressed is the potential inability of U.S. business leaders in service-related industries to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage for the organizations. Traditionally, leadership behaviors, customer satisfaction, and sustainable competition were studied by researchers independently in the literature-reviewed articles. However, in this qualitative study, the researcher examined all dimensions of customer loyalty to develop a new operational pathway for the practical sustainability of competitive advantage. Additionally, the research focused on the marketing strategies of a successful, highly reputable, and profitable hospitality entity in the southeastern United States.

Initially, the researcher examined the relationship between leadership behaviors, such as employee engagement, and how this corresponds to the customer-employee engagement principle for service organizations. The researcher then combined the data findings into a singular pathway model indicating the stages of customer loyalty, from employee-leadership behavior to competitive advantage. This research study filled the knowledge gap of how a crucial leadership role can help instill the importance of satisfying customer needs and engagement with service-related consumers. The researcher selected the single case study methodology for a South Florida-based service entity to explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system over an established period through detailed data collection practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants for the sample size were identified as experienced frontline managers and non-

management level employees, all with daily interaction with hospitality customers. Furthermore, the researcher employed MAXQDA software to gain knowledge of discovered themes within the study context. Based on the project data from the qualified participants, the researcher developed a working pathway model for attaining effective customer loyalty, with the challenging goal of sustaining a competitive advantage for any service organization.

Background of the Problem

In today's competitive and global business world, any successful corporation needs to attain the strategic goal of customer loyalty. Arslan (2020) suggested that loyal customers can be a consistent source of income for companies by affecting the people around them with first-hand advice and promotional incentives. Another critical perspective for this research problem was that many service organizations, such as hotels, restaurants, and tourism, understand the basic need to satisfy their customers for repeat purchases. Researchers can evaluate customer loyalty by applying harmonic relationships with their existing customer base (Khairawati, 2020). However, many service providers fail to understand the acquisition cost of new customers and its subsequent impact on overall profitability. To fully understand the impact of customer acquisition costs, academic research has focused on the findings that most service businesses know that acquiring new customers is approximately five to six times more expensive in promotional prices than retaining and satisfying existing customers (Arslan, 2020).

Previous research topics on customer retention have ranged from service quality to service design to customer experience (Kandampully et al., 2018). Several studies suggested that service providers must understand the interaction between service quality and customer satisfaction. Quality-centric companies often use post-purchase customer satisfaction surveys to elicit comments on service indicators, such as politeness, employee knowledge, and attention to

detail. In a recent study by Koo et al. (2020), customer satisfaction was considered the core determinant and critical antecedent for customer loyalty. This research focused on sustaining customer loyalty while improving an organization's competitive advantage. The researcher explained that neither isolation nor strategic marketing could create a customer experience. Both dynamics must work in unity with each other. Seminal contributions have been made by Ramanathan et al. (2017), suggesting that both loyalty and service operation attributes significantly impact consumer behavior, while the component of service operations facilitates the relationship between the interaction between consumer behavior and customer loyalty.

Problem Statement

The general problem addressed in this study was the need for service industry leaders to understand consumer loyalty dynamics successfully or risk losing competitive advantage for the organization. Arslan (2020) postulated that incidents of customer dissatisfaction could prevent new customers from coming to the business. Dissatisfied customers can switch companies to competitive entities through word-of-mouth complaints to family, friends, and social media platforms. In a recent study, Davis and Nag (2020) suggested that customer loyalty is one of the critical constructs for sustaining long-term competitiveness. Ramanathan et al. (2017) contended that leadership and employees must understand that any negative deviation in customer loyalty often results in losing an organization's competitive advantage. Lee and Park (2021) stipulated that trust, commitment, and interpersonal relationships directly affect consumers' purchase decisions and act as antecedents to customer loyalty. The specific problem to be addressed is the potential inability of South Florida service industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this single case study's flexible (qualitative) design aimed to understand how customer loyalty in most service industry businesses relates to their performance and profitability outcomes of competitive advantage within their markets. The research explored how service organizations gain a competitive advantage by building on the pathways from customer satisfaction to customer loyalty. The net gain for these service organizations was to make on this sustained loyalty to position the organization for sustainable competitive advantage. Davis and Nag (2020) asserted that sustainable competitive advantage was based on the durability of the difference and the capability gap between an organization and its competitors. In addition, competitive advantage can be sustained when operational efficiencies, leadership support, and performance effectiveness align with the organization's strategy (Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2022).

Research Questions

The purpose of the qualitative single case research study is to guide the research data collection process on the topics(s) of the study, with both focused and relevant objectives. Accordingly, the researcher formulated specific questions to collect insightful information that ultimately influenced the data outcomes on customer satisfaction, consumer loyalty, and its impact on the competitive advantage of a hospitality industry organization in the southern United States.

RQ 1.   What steps can South Florida hospitality industry leaders take with their employees to help promote customer loyalty?

RQ 1a. What negative actions or behaviors do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that fail to promote customer loyalty?

RQ 1b. What positive actions do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that promote customer loyalty?

Research Questions 1-1b. These qualitative questions generated valuable information on developing critical customer loyalty perspectives in the service industries. The dual emphasis of these questions approached how leaders and frontline service employees view the essential steps needed to maintain customer loyalty and determine the common elements that help promote competitive advantage. Perceived service quality is an important strategic development consideration for service firms, given the increase in consumer purchase power and competition in the customer market. The study by Koo et al. (2020) indicated how strong customer loyalty could develop when service providers create solid and lasting emotional bonds with their customers. Customer loyalty is critical for long-term profitability, success, and competitive advantage. Both trust and commitment are the key drivers to sustained loyalty, which translates to the development of service differentiation and competitive advantage (Ramanathan et al., 2017).

RQ 2.   What do employees need to know or learn from leadership to promote customer loyalty?

RQ 2a.   How important is hospitality leadership to promote and demonstrate superior customer loyalty in their daily actions and words to their service staff?

RQ 2b. What are the essential business characteristics that identify an effective hospitality leader?

Research Questions 2-2b. These open-ended qualitative questions identified research data on critical elements of the impact of customer loyalty, such as trust and commitment to repurchasing products or services that contribute to maintaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace. The overarching value of these research questions addresses the success elements that contribute to customer satisfaction and subsequent customer loyalty. Loyalty leads to

consumers' wishes to purchase the same brand and commitment (Arslan, 2020). The most salient

definition of customer loyalty refers to the purchasing tendency of current customers to become

repeat customers based on their past experiences and future expectations. Conversely, customer

disloyalty outcomes demonstrate fidelity to purchasing other similar competitive brands,

resulting in the customer experiencing little to no post-purchase dissonance (Koo et al., 2020).

RQ 3   How important is it for service industry employees and leaders to understand the

meaning of competitive advantage?

RQ 3a.   What are the most important advantages a hospitality company can practice to

achieve competitive advantage?

Research Questions 3-3a. These exploratory questions were designed to generate

comparative research data and help to posit the importance of customer satisfaction in service-

related industries through the eyes of frontline employees and managers in the South Florida

market. Researchers must understand how customer satisfaction can be transformed into long-

term loyalty in a constructive process to improve competitive positioning in the market. Another

key driver for this research question explored how a service leader can differentiate their

management styles between immediate satisfaction versus long-term loyalty and commitment.

Davis and Nag (2020) suggested that determining the importance of customer loyalty helps

service firms evaluate their competitive advantage and future advertising campaigns.

Specific Problem Statement Coverage

The specific problem addressed was the potential inability of South Florida service

industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage.

The proposed three research questions address vital perspectives of the problem statement on

consumer loyalty and the importance of consistently improving customer satisfaction, building

customer trust, and commitment to sustainable competitive advantage. The target boundary of this study was South Florida to narrow the scope of the research to one of the most competitive service markets in the United States.

Nature of the Study

The research study was designed as a flexible qualitative study of the problem statement of customer loyalty, specifically, the inability of service industry managers to gain customer loyalty resulting in the potential loss of competitive advantage. This research project adopted the constructivism paradigm, which is directly associated with the qualitative design method. Its purpose is to understand a phenomenon from the eyes and experiences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The preliminary research data was obtained from numerous data-collection instruments, such as group meetings and then one-to-one interviews, that were useful for developing and elucidating first-hand experiences of the phenomenon. The literature review identified that when collecting research data, avoiding bias is one facet of a broader set of values that falls under the rubric of "research ethics" (Yin, 2018, p. 87). Therefore, the researcher selected a service entity's single case study methodology to explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system over an established period through detailed data collection practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Paradigms

Researchers suggested that numerous paradigm choices, such as positivism, constructivism, interpretivism, and critical theory, are more of the standard business research paradigms used in integrative studies (Rehman & Alharthi, 2018). Positivism is considered a common paradigm choice for scientific, quantitative research projects. Positivism is the philosophy that emphasizes empiricism, which highlights the necessity to study observable

components and objectivity. Post-positivism is a philosophy that rejects positivism and adopts new assumptions to present the truth (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Within the interpretivism paradigm, the role of research is to interpret the world through the interactions between the human subject and the researcher in the study (Rehman & Alharthi). The critical theory principles "are concerned with empowering human subjects to transcend the constraints placed on them by racism, class, and gender" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 29). Under the critical theory paradigm, the role of the researcher is transformative.

The research paradigm chosen for this study was constructivism. Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that constructivism aims to reply to the participant's view of the situation or phenomenon as much as possible. This approach leads the researcher to understand better the participant's opinions of complexity rather than narrow the meaning into a select number of general classifications (Yin, 2018). The researcher listened more carefully to open-ended questions about what the participants may say or do in their workplace. Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained that the most effective method of reaching an inclusive central research question is to pose the broadest questions possible to address the research problem statement.

The researcher chose the constructivism framework to study how quality commitment from frontline employees and leadership can complement customer loyalty within selected service industries. The constructivist paradigm allowed the researcher to make scholarly assumptions about the nature of service providers' phenomenal realism, making a meaningful interpretation of the collected research data. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) concluded that philosophical assumptions and concepts help align your thinking within the context of the research problem, its significance, and how to approach the situation and contribute to its solution. In addition, constructivist researchers focus on the "process" of the exchange among the

selected participants and anchor attention on the specific contexts in which people work to understand the background influences of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

The three most common method designs in business research studies are Fixed, Flexible, and Mixed Methods. Robson and McCartan (2016) posited that fixed research designs are theory-driven (deductive) and often associated with quantitative studies. Additionally, fixed methods are associated with aggregates, with general tendencies, and working with group properties. These experiments report results in group averages rather than individual results. Flexible research design, which aligns with real-world projects (inductive) and qualitative studies, can be considered a "work in progress and can adapt as the research evolves" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 146). Finally, mixed methods design employs a purposeful combination and strengths of qualitative and quantitative methods.

For this qualitative study, the researcher chose the flexible design study to understand how customer loyalty relates to performance and profitability, compared to their competitive advantage position in their respective markets. The research explored how service organizations gain a competitive advantage by building on the linear pathways from customer satisfaction to customer loyalty. Service organizations build long-term customer loyalty to position the organization for sustainable competitive advantage. Davis and Nag (2020) concluded that competitive advantage is based on the durability difference and the capability gap between an organization and its competitors. The outcome of competitive advantage can be sustained in most service companies when operational efficiencies, leadership support, and performance effectiveness align with the organization's goals and objectives (Anning-Dorson, 2018). The selection of mixed-method design is often characteristic when qualitative and quantitative

methods are used in the same research project. Traditional fixed designs assume a "detached" researcher to safeguard the researcher from having an emotional effect on the findings in the research study (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Research Methods

This study was conducted with a flexible design using qualitative methods; specifically, a single case study design was used. The researcher needs to choose the appropriate method and design to ensure the results' validity and the study's integrity (Kohler et al., 2022). Qualitative research is subjective, with five methods designed to illustrate the participants' professional observation while maintaining neutral lines without judgment in focus areas such as cultures, societies, and individuals (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These five standard qualitative research methodologies are Ethnography, Narrative, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, and Case Study.

Ethnography involves the researcher entrenching themselves into the daily work and routine of the subject(s). The researcher can observe the subjects' environment, mannerisms, traditions, culture, and experiences (Collins & Stockton, 2018). For example, research methods can help organizations assess how customers use a specific product within a group of people, develop new products, or revise existing products in a real-life environment (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Some of the consequences of ethnography are that researchers need to immerse themselves into the environment, to live or work like someone else to gain experience (Van Maanen, 2011). Ethnography research is often used in social sciences, such as anthropology studies, and, therefore, was not the selected method for this study.

The narrative research method gathers data for one or more subjects through fieldwork, direct observation or interviews, and document reviews over a specific period. According to Makkonen et al. (2012), the narrative method evolves around the events (or relationships)

contributing to direct human interaction. Therefore, it captures the context of the exchange as perceived by the individuals of the study. However, the narrative method has been known to need help with the negotiations of data interpretation and presentation of findings, which can be problematic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, triangulation could allow researchers to apply the narrative research method to help ease some trepidations about the trustworthiness and validity of collected data for the selected case study method.

The phenomenology method focuses on understanding how subjects view themselves and their world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Most researchers consider this method an experience or perception-based research methodology. However, phenomenology research often leads to researcher-inducted biases (Stolz, 2020). According to Reiter et al. (2011), the phenomenology method emphasizes interpreting the people's experience involved in the human experience. The data findings were more challenging to interpret, and the presentation of conclusions was more difficult. Therefore, the researcher selected something other than the phenomenology method based on these potential obstacles.

Grounded theory helps analyze new theoretical bases, allowing the researcher to generate a general explanation (or theory) of a process or action shaped by the observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The application of grounded theory can use this approach to evaluate how customers use their product or determine its critical attributes. According to Reiter et al. (2011), "In grounded theory, a theory emerges from the data in a natural setting" (p. 40). However, the researcher in this study decided not to apply the grounded theory method since it may be challenging to determine when categories are saturated or if the theory is appropriately developed.

The case study method encompasses the study of a case within the context of real-life experiences or bounded systems (Yin, 2018). In-depth data collection techniques, such as focus groups and one-on-one interviews, are needed in case of studies over a given timeline. According to Denney and Weckesser (2022), "Both interviews and focus groups tend to be flexible and non-standardized, with greater interest in the participants' perspectives and experience than for quantitative research" (p. 1). Within the marketing application context, case studies are helpful tools to formulate new strategies and understand customer behavioral influences.

Finally, the researcher chose the single case study method because it is appropriate to guide the research data collection process on the study topics(s) (Yin, 2018). For example, the researcher framed the research questions to solicit insightful data on leadership engagement with frontline staff, employees' dual understanding of customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty, and its impact on the competitive advantage of service industry organizations. However, it is crucial to maintain semi-structured questions that elicit answers that must be leading questions for the participants (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). Other methods, such as ethnography, were considered since the data collection process involves the researcher embedded into the research subject's natural environment and daily routine.

Research Triangulation

Triangulation is a research method used to ensure the collected findings are robust, comprehensive, and well-developed while validating the data and credibility of the research findings. Triangulation refers to multiple methods leading to the same results, which gives credence and unbiased reliability to the research findings of the phenomenon (Noble & Heale, 2019). There are four types of triangulation methods: 1) data triangulation – matters such as time, space, and people; 2) investigator triangulation – use of several researchers for the study; 3)

theory triangulation – encourages several theoretical schemes for interpretation; and 4) methodological triangulation – promotes the use of several data collection methods.

According to Moon (2019), data triangulation concentrates more on procuring data from multiple sources within a defined collection of data methods. This approach helps to ensure that the researcher obtains a complete perspective of the phenomena under investigation. For example, data triangulation may be used by a hotel marketing manager conducting focus groups with customers to examine the perceived value of their services and accommodations. The marketing manager must ensure that the focus group participants represent their customer base, considering age, gender, ethnicity, and possibly income levels as indicators.

The investigator triangulation method uses multiple investigators to collect and analyze the obtained data properly. One of the significant advantages of using more than one investigator is to hold better control over bringing personal biases into the study (Moon, 2019). For example, a researcher could have a pre-conceived perspective on a group of customers, leading to the potential of skewed research results. According to Carter et al. (2011), using two or more investigators helps reduce the possibility of personal biases in analyzing the results and confirming the study's findings.

The theory triangulation method uses various theories to analyze and interpret the study's findings. According to Carter et al. (2011), "With this type of triangulation, different theories and hypotheses can assist the researcher in supporting or refuting findings" (p. 545). For example, a marketing researcher may use Porter's Five Forces Theory when examining the effects of differentiation on customer loyalty. Moon (2019) suggested that theory triangulation helps formulate the research design and implementation.

The methodological triangulation method uses multiple data collection methods, such as in-depth personal interviews and small focus groups, to gain insight into the phenomenon experienced by the participants. Carter et al. (2011) explained that in-depth interviews are powerful research tools to elicit rich participant information. In addition, method triangulation allows for participant spontaneity and builds flexibility with interaction, such as non-verbal cues. For example, a marketing manager could collect primary personal data from the company sales records, direct customer interviews, and observe customers in a real-time leisure environment.

According to Moon (2019), methodological triangulation can be used by one type or in combination with several methods. For example, the researcher used the data triangulation method to capture qualitative data from different subjects at varying times and settings. In addition to data triangulation, the researcher utilized methodological triangulation since the researcher used various data collection instruments such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus group findings, commonly used in case study research. Interpreting possible divergence and convergence data point results was essential, and methodological triangulation was instrumental in the evaluation process. Furthermore, triangulation is confirmatory and contributes to demonstrating the reliability and validity of the study (Moon).

Summary of the Nature of the Study

The constructivist paradigm is concurrent with the qualitative research approach and understanding a phenomenon from the eyes and experiences of the participants. The decision for qualitative research allowed for face-to-face (focus group) interaction with participants, who collaborated more discreetly with participants with the first-hand 'customer host' relationship. Carter et al. (2011) suggested that individual direct interviews are the most effective method of collecting first-hand data. Furthermore, the triangulation of various forms of the data collection

process allowed for supplementary credibility and validation of the research findings (Moon, 2019). For this reason, the researcher chose to use data and methodological triangulation to synthesize the data findings of this study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this qualitative study was compiled on the five structural concepts leading to sustainable competitive advantage. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the conceptual framework acts as the point that pulls together and connects the identified components of the study. First, the researcher identified several relative theories, such as the Expectancy-Confirmation Theory, to investigate the context of customer satisfaction through the eyes and perceived value of the customers. Next, the researcher identified a major hospitality management company in the South Florida market with a diverse portfolio of hotel properties. Finally, the participants (actors) were identified as frontline staff and hospitality industry managers. This allowed the researcher to access a significant source of participants with gained experience and observations in studying customer loyalty and competitiveness.

During his research, the researcher noted several common themes that explained the importance of cultivating organizational resources, most importantly, human resources, from the new employee orientation stage through their continued employment with the company. Sheth et al. (2020) suggested that one of the critical indicators of successful service companies was their repositioning of customer services from an administrative function to a more strategic perspective. Sheth et al. averred that service employees must be empowered with decision-making authority at the service experience level. Leadership behaviors demonstrated a crucial role in ensuring employees are adequately trained and given earned empowerment to perform their job duties to satisfy their customers.

Based on the results of this research study, the researcher developed a more compelling application of the newly discovered themes and knowledge from the case study data findings. This research study gained data analysis findings of numerous codes, five prominent themes of 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) caring organizational culture. In addition, two subthemes were discovered: 1) leading by example and 2) knowing customers' needs and wants, in conjunction with the original three anticipated themes of 1) leadership communications, 2) maintaining customer satisfaction, and 3) sustaining employee engagement. Furthermore, Figure 1 illustrates the critical role that leadership communication behavior has on every segment of the customer loyalty pathway to sustaining a competitive advantage.

Figure 1

Proposed New Pathway to Customer Loyalty

Concepts

In qualitative research, the explanation requires the development of concepts or generalized characteristics associated with people, objects, or events (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The conceptual framework is based on and linked with the literature review, which forms the context of the research analysis. For example, research studies have demonstrated how customer satisfaction leads to loyalty, which is essential to sustaining competitive advantage (Slack & Singh, 2020).

Leadership Behavior. Business leaders must understand how to drive customer value and integrate the advantages of delivered services to impact value creation and strategic competitiveness for all stakeholders (Sheth et al., 2020). There remains an overarching need for service industry leaders to understand the innovative dynamics of competitive positioning in their markets. Anning-Dorson (2018) explained that organizational leadership is critical for fostering the proper strategic fit and creative environment to sustain the context of competitive advantage successfully.

Relationship Marketing. Kiseleva et al. (2016) suggested that customers can be satisfied within a particular transaction; however, the critical goal is to replicate the single customer transaction into a long-term relationship for repeat business. As banking and healthcare services experience more personal and frequent customer interaction, the relationship becomes more substantial and vice versa (Tareque & Islam, 2020). According to Dooley (2018), "successful companies spend time with their customers beyond the initial purchasing transaction, providing value and building engagement and alignment" (para. 1). Arslan (2020) posited that marketing had seen more focus on customer relationships in recent years than maximizing transactions.

Customer Satisfaction. Service organizations develop marketing strategies to focus on customer satisfaction, understanding that customer satisfaction leads to loyalty and increased profitability. Cudby (2020) suggested that maintaining positive relationships and plenary employee engagement are critical to sustainable customer satisfaction. Often, many service organizations downplay the significance of building long-term relationships and focus more on the short-term transaction at the moment in time. Gremier et al. (2020) contended that building on the solid framework of long-term relationships and increasing the perceived quality value of a service can lead to a sustainable pathway of customer satisfaction.

Customer Loyalty. The framework of customer loyalty builds on the antecedent of earned customer satisfaction. Slack and Singh (2020) suggested the conceptual link between loyalty is the causal relationship between the quality of the service, quality perceptions and expectations, and the mediating role of customer satisfaction. Slack and Singh studied the two-dimensional relationships of behavior and attitudes to recognize the significant increase in customer loyalty to a predictive service. Cudby (2020) suggested that customer loyalty is a multi-step process requiring the engagement of each stakeholder in the organization. Khairawati (2020) contributed his research on the impact of loyalty programs. His study found that membership participants appreciate the benefits of discount or awards programs; however, such programs do not drive customer satisfaction. In addition, customer loyalty provides long-term economic benefits to organizations by improving customer relationships and permitting new customers to be gained at a lower acquisition cost (Arslan, 2020).

Sustainable Competitive Advantage. Thompson et al. (2018) postulated that sustainable competitive advantage is the key to business success in today's competitive environment. Lamb et al. (2019) shared a simple definition: sustainable competitive advantage "is one that the

competition cannot copy" (p. 24). Competitive advantage is the foundation for any business to

have a more significant customer focus, better profit margins, higher staff retention, and

customer satisfaction than competitors. Furthermore, Thompson et al. (2018) shared that

competitive advantage must involve the leadership's willingness to modify the strategy in

response to changing market conditions, technological advancements, shifts in competitors'

movements, and embracing new ideas to improve the processes. Finally, tomorrow's competitive

advantage sources are the skills of leadership, engaged employees, and organizational assets

(Thompson et al., 2019).

Theories

Theories attempt to explain phenomena meaningfully and logically, often following some

narrative structure (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Therefore, this qualitative study applied the

following four conceptual business strategies:

Expectancy-Confirmation Theory. Slack and Singh (2020) suggested comparing the

consumers' pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase evaluation as the foundational findings

for this theory. In addition, Lin et al. (2009) stated, "the expectation-confirmation theory (ECT)

suggests that the consumer's level of satisfaction with a service determines the consumer's initial

expectation on the service, as well as discrepancies between expectation and service

performance" (p. 316). Furthermore, the researchers concluded that the expectation-confirmation

theory hypothesizes service expectation as an essential determinant of satisfaction towards

service since service expectation serves as the baseline for consumers to form evaluative

judgments on the focus of the service.

Slack and Singh (2020) stipulated another contradictory theory called the Expectancy-

Disconfirmation Theory, which is defined as the "gap" between product or service performance

and the point of satisfaction and is known as expectancy dissatisfaction. Other research shows

another definition of expectancy-disconfirmation theory as it relates to public services, such as

utility companies, and the level of satisfaction of customers with such services (Liao et al.,

2017). The rationale for selecting this theory was based on the consideration that the researcher

used the concept of ECT to determine the validity and effectiveness of services provided to

hospitality consumers.

       Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory. In 1994, consumer researchers Rust and Oliver developed

a customer loyalty theory based on the initial three constructs of quality, value, and satisfaction.

In later years, the researchers added the fourth variable of customer loyalty to this theory.

Gallarza et al. (2016) suggested that their four research variables lead to cognitive and affective

customer satisfaction. Collectively, the variables function as the building blocks of customer

loyalty and sustainable competitive advantage in the market. Dickerson (2016) explained that the

three apportioned categories of customer loyalty are (1) satisfaction drivers that comprise the

total customer experience (TCE), (2) the dual-dimensional construct of cognitive and affective

commitment, and (3) loyalty orientation which defines individual differences on customer

loyalty (LO).

       With the framework of research and literature review, no contrary theory was found with

the basis of the satisfaction-loyalty theory. All peer-reviewed literature agreed that sustaining

customer satisfaction was the building block to loyalty. Davis and Nag (2020) stipulated that

customer satisfaction is the antecedent to maintaining customer loyalty. The rationale for

selecting this theory is the framework for understanding how to sustain competitive advantage.

       Commitment–Trust Theory. Previous research by Brown et al. (2019) suggested that

Commitment-Trust Theory has focused chiefly on internal channel relationships; however, more

recent research has concentrated on the company's strategy - customer equity commitment pathways. Alzoubi et al. (2020) indicated the significant effect of how service quality interrelates with trust, satisfaction, and long-term customer commitment. Alzoubi et al. explained that trust is one of the most confirmed constructs in relationship marketing research. Trust signifies each party's expectation (or belief) that the relationship results in trust. From a customer's perspective, commitment describes the customer's desire to develop a long-term relationship with the company (Ammari et al., 2017).

Similar to the Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory, the researcher could not identify any contrary study, understanding that long-term commitment of your customer required an earned level of trust from the customers. In Brown et al. (2019) research, the researchers looked at internal channel relationships, as stated in the previous paragraph. However, more research must concentrate on building customer equity for sustainable profitability. The rationale for using this established theory within this study was to focus on customers' gained long-term trust and commitment to sustain competitive advantage.

Porter's Theory of Competitive Advantage. Porter's Theory emphasizes the generic strategies of five forces, focusing on differentiating products or services to achieve outcomes to gain a competitive advantage. Anastasiu (2020) argued that Porter's Theory validates that his five strategies focus on the quality of products and services for differentiation and can analyze an organization's strengths and weaknesses to identify critical factors for improvement and sustainable competitive advantage.

Is Michael Porter's Five Forces significant in today's business environment? Porter's Theory was first published in 1979, before digitalization advancements and globalization. Isabelle et al. (2020) recently modified to expand Porter's theory to include the following new

21st-century external forces: regulation/deregulation activities, innovativeness of competitors, unprecedented globalization, and the threat of further digitalization. Many recent research studies, such as Isabelle et al., demonstrated the need to build on the constructs of Michael Porter in the new world of global competition and government regulations. The rationale for using this established strategic theory was to explore how differentiation and other Porter's forces affect the sustainability of competition from a global perspective. Furthermore, Porter's research helped improve the knowledge gap in the 21st-century globalized business world.

Actors/Participants

This research study's actors (or participants) were the frontline managers and employees of a Forbes 5-star hospitality resort in the dynamic South Florida market. The researcher identified one highly reputable hospitality resort company with its headquarters in South Florida. This privately owned organization manages a portfolio of various hospitality business units on its property, such as hotels, restaurants, and golf courses, to name a few. Twenty-nine participants were qualified to participate in this study. Furthermore, the diversity of their management portfolio and professional staff allowed the researcher to gain collective insights and access to growing and successful business entities.

Constructs

According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), constructs are abstract concepts specifically selected to explain a phenomenon. Cooper (2019) contended that constructs are developed by combining unpretentious concepts when the meaning is not observable. For example, sustainable competitive advantage may be hidden. However, competitive advantage comprises multiple underlying concepts, such as customer loyalty and relationship marketing. Since this dissertation

utilized a flexible design, qualitative single case study approach, the following topic of

constructs was discussed in this section:

The first construct is relationship marketing, defined as the fundamental paradigm going

from a short-term, transactional encounter to a long-term relationship for repeat purchases

(Amoako, 2019). In a related study by Ndubisi and Natarajan (2018), the researchers contended

that customers would switch to another brand if they perceived a higher level of value.

Furthermore, effective marketing strategies are now more customer-centric versus transactional-

orientated. Relationship marketing is a unique construct that acts as the antecedent that

encompasses value creation and the development of marketing strategies to sustain customer

loyalty to a company's brand and image (Amoako, 2019).

The second construct to be researched was leadership behaviors, commonly known as the

critical role of leadership support in service-related management entities. Cultivating the

company's vital strategic fit is essential to deliver a competitive advantage (Anning-Dorson,

2018). Leadership behaviors had a direct alignment with the performance and well-being of

employees. Leadership behaviors, such as emotions and how leaders deal with them, can

significantly affect the overall well-being of their employees (Inceoglu et al., 2018).

Furthermore, leadership behaviors are demonstrated with ethical leadership behaviors and

reflected in their employees' moral values (Kerse, 2022).

Another construct of this study was customer satisfaction, defined as the customer's

perceptions of a product's value and quality through the eyes of the customer. (Gallarza et al.,

2016). In a related study, Hamenda (2018) contended that a product or service's quality directly

and indirectly influences satisfaction, factoring in the dual considerations of price fairness and

quality as antecedents of customer satisfaction. Confirmation of a customer's expectations, as

denoted in the Expectancy-Confirmation Theory, promotes a higher level of customer satisfaction when the provider's expectations are met or exceeded (Rather et al., 2019). Furthermore, the customer's perceived value is essential to customer satisfaction (Hamenda).

Customer loyalty was considered a major building block for this research study. Loyal customers are a valuable asset to an organization because they provide an informative path to strengthen its image and make it difficult for competitors to attract customers and set higher service prices (Gallarza et al., 2016). Effective customer communication is an integral loyalty construct to maintaining direct contact with and between the customer and the provider (Melewar et al., 2017). Another consideration of customer loyalty was trust and commitment, building long-term relationships with the customers to establish repeat purchase behavior (Arslan, 2020).

The final constructs should lead a service organization to a sustainable competitive advantage. One can define competitive advantage as excellent consumer service obligatory to an organization's long-term sustainability, competitive advantage, customer loyalty, and repeat purchases (Sheth et al., 2020). In 1993, Professor Michael Porter developed his Generic Five Forces Theory on competitive advantage, which is continued in today's business environment with modifications due to globalization and digital innovations (Bel, 2017). One of Porter's Five Forces is the factor of differentiation, a methodology for strategic positioning and differentiating your product or service from that of your industry competitors (Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2022).

Relationships between Concepts, Theories, Actors, and Constructs

The relationship between the concepts and theories is the pivotal point to understanding the context of this qualitative study. For example, the researcher formulated theories and concepts from the study's multi-dimensional constructs, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty,

and competitive advantage. It was essential to stipulate that several of these relational constructs, such as customer loyalty, embed the building blocks of customer satisfaction. Therefore, it was critical to ensure the participants (or actors) could deliver meaningful information to the problem statement with well-structured research questions developed on the constructs of the study.

The research framework conceptualized how the literature review worked with the theoretical lens of the study's formulating new knowledge. The five constructs (*as illustrated in Figure 1*) are interrelated and build on each previous construct to sustain competitive advantage for an organization. For example, one principal indicator studied was the relationship between customer satisfaction and its succession into long-term customer loyalty, thereby building sustainable competitive advantage.

Summary of Research Framework

In summary, the framework of the research study was multi-dimensional as it synthesized the concepts of customer behavior, leading to a sustainable competitive advantage. In service-related organizations, the pulse of a business is palpable by the customer's trust, commitment, and loyalty. The constructs and theories delineated how engaged service leaders must enhance customer satisfaction in their operational applications. The theoretical framework outlined in this qualitative study developed a blended but defined pathway of how customer loyalty is foundational to achieving and sustaining competitive positioning in any service business.

Definition of Terms

This section lists definitions to explain the terminology related to this research paper. Many of these terms are known to the readers. However, this section provided the scope of the specific definition used within this study.

Customer Engagement: In a study by Rather et al. (2019), the researchers defined customer engagement as the positive interaction between the employee and the customer that enhances the brand experience. Customer engagement has gained global attention in marketing since customers can help promote or compromise brand value (Beckers et al., 2018).

Customer Loyalty: Customer loyalty is essential to organizational success, profitability, and sustainable competitive advantage. Loyal customers are patrons committed to repeat purchases, supported by the point that these customers are the 'ambassadors' for the corporate brand through word-of-mouth advertising (Hollebeek, 2022).

Customer Satisfaction: This topic has many academic definitions; for this research paper, customer satisfaction is meeting or exceeding customer expectations based on the customer's overall experience with the product or service (Ozkan et al., 2020).

Effective Communications: One of the most crucial leadership qualities necessary for organizational success is engaged leaders spending 80-90% of their time communicating daily with followers. Effective communications are considered two-way between the sender and receiver of the adequately interpreted message (Mandonko & April, 2020).

Employee Engagement: Two antecedents to employee engagement are leadership, mainly leadership exchange, and perceived social support of supervisors and coworkers (Orlowski et al., 2021). Employee engagement is a popular paradigm. Organizations should reap the dual benefit of cost-saving through employee engagement and customer engagement through revenue generation (Chandni & Rahman, 2020). Engaged employees are essential for the efficiency of an organization. With the positive direction of leadership, employees perform more effectively and at a higher level of performance (Young et al., 2018).

Leadership Behavior: This terminology was defined as establishing and sharing a clear vision for each organizational stakeholder, providing the information, knowledge, and approach to realize the mission and vision, and balancing the conflicting objectives of all stakeholders. Bannay et al. (2020) suggested that leadership behaviors are integral to employee engagement. The role of the leader is to encourage high-level employee performance, which predominately leads to job satisfaction by creating a proactive environment for work engagement. In the context of this paper, several leadership styles, such as servant and transformational leaders, were discussed in detail.

Relationship Marketing: Involves creating, maintaining, and enhancing solid internal relationships with customers and other brand stakeholders. Relationship marketing provides essential characteristics such as trust, respect, shared values, communications, and commitment to help the organization understand its customers beyond a single transaction (Amoako, 2019).

Sustainable Competitive Advantage: The definition of sustainable competitive advantage refers to the ability of an organization to continuously adjust its ongoing strategy to maintain a competitive performance advantage in an ever-changing global business environment (Li et al., 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are often associated with research deficiencies, including the availability of reliable resources and the researcher's limitations that could be out of their control or invalidated. According to Simon (2011), "limitations are potential weaknesses in your study and are out of the researchers' control" (p. 2). Another consideration of limitations was the element of time.

Assumptions

Conducting semi-structured interviews and interactive focus groups helped procure the required qualitative data. Such primary data met the needs of validity, assumed the collected primary data was trustworthy, and supported the researcher in answering the research questions. Confirming truthfulness is one of the crucial constructs of the research process while safeguarding the confidentiality of the data subjects (Niu et al., 2018). For ethical considerations, researchers must ensure the privacy and protection of the research information gathered from the study participants to mitigate the potential risk of untruthfulness (Yin, 2018). Researchers need to make credible assumptions at the start of the research study to minimize the risk of unbiased and invalid information. However, it is equally important to consider the assumptions' quality and validity before giving an opinion on the study (Armstrong & Kepler, 2018).

According to Leedy and Ormond (2010), "assumptions are so basic that, without them, the research problem itself could not exist" (p. 62). In addition, researchers cannot avoid assumptions as every viewpoint holds some concealed assumption. For example, the researcher assumed and stipulated that participants of this study provided accurate and reliable information within their focus group and face-to-face interactions to compile the outcome. Another assumption about this study was the consideration that participants had the same level of understanding of the interview questions without compromising the integrity and validity of the study findings.

Limitations

Researchers find limitations in almost every point of a research project. Researchers must often explain how they intend to deal with identifiable limitations without affecting the study's outcome (Simon, 2011). Limitations and assumptions are often grouped since they are viewed interchangeably with the same essence. Therefore, to mitigate any confusion risk, researchers

should cite them distinctively and ensure that both are consistent at the practical level

(Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Research studies have two significant limitations: internal and

external validity threats.

For example, limitations are often considered constraints that can impact the selected

research design, varying time limits, and funding restrictions. Therefore, a limitation is an

"imposed" constraint that could be outside of the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki,

2018). The researcher anticipated both time constraints and the lack of trustworthy participants,

which could have been limitations in this research study. To mitigate these possible limitations,

the researcher planned to procure the data from formal survey questions and build initial trust

with the participants to obtain reliable results.

Delimitations

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), delimitations are not as much as "why I

did this" but rather "why I did not do it like this" (p. 157). Therefore, researchers need to be

diligent in handling delimitations and properly cite within their findings any plausible reason(s)

to reject a particular boundary or inaction during the research phase of the study. Theofanidis and

Fountouki suggested that other limitations could include time constraints and cultural

boundaries. Coker (2022) indicated that delimitations are the complex roadmap to the successful

completion of a dissertation; however, they are often viewed as "business as usual."

The scope of this study focused on the researcher's plans to select frontline hospitality

managers for the survey portion of this study. Furthermore, selecting this sample population of

managers elicited more direct survey results on the marketing practices and leadership behaviors

as critical boundaries of the problem statement. Another delimitation to this study was the South

Florida market's geographic location and some of the characteristics of seasonal business and employee retention challenges.

Significance of the Study

This section explained the significance of the study concerning filling the gaps in the literature review, implementation of biblical integration, and the application of the business practice as it relates to the marketing cohort. This study aimed to provide valuable research on how organizations can improve employee-customer engagement to improve customer satisfaction, leading to competitive advantage. Employee engagement and happiness are directly linked to employee and customer satisfaction, leading to loyalty and profitability (Cain et al., 2018). The section on biblical integration provided how people build their personal and professional lives on trust and respect from a Christian worldview. Finally, the section on business practices relating to the marketing cognate discussed how marketing directly interacts with all departments and their performance.

Reduction of Gaps in the Literature

The study's findings contributed to understanding the variance of leadership behaviors towards service employees, service employee engagement with their customers, and building on this collaboration to develop long-term customer loyalty. The goal of this strategic pathway was to improve performance and sustain competitive advantage. In the literature review of this study, there was a substantial amount of research studies on customer satisfaction and sustainable competitive advantage. However, more research must be conducted to reduce the gap of misunderstanding on how organizations achieve the essential antecedents of customer satisfaction. Kearney (2017) suggested that whether the gap is small or large, the study's design

was to fill any gap appropriately and rigorously to enable a forward understanding of the field of study.

This study disclosed the engagement lacuna between service frontline managers and their employees. Furthermore, this "gap" could be considered a disconnect, leading to poor customer engagement (and potential customer mistrust and disloyalty) during the customer's transactional experience. Research surveys asked several pertinent questions addressing employee versus leadership engagement and focused more on the causal relationship through the prism of generational or company cultural perspectives. For example, Bellon et al. (2010) posited that "a company's core values must be communicated to all employees and must be practiced by all leadership to ensure buy-in to the organizational culture" (p. 1).

The ability of a service organization to measure and understand employee attitudes and behaviors concerning their ability to maintain satisfied customers effectively is often an overlooked task. Influential leaders need to identify which staff members contribute to the organization's overall goals and which could be more effectively contributing to the organization's purposes (Orlowski, 2021). Furthermore, this evidence helped to close this gap within the existing marketing constructs of customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and the pursuit of sustainable competitive advantage.

Implications for Biblical Implementation

This section discussed the biblical review of the impact of qualitative research methodology in our everyday lives. How do our business and personal decisions reconcile with God's plan to serve him with love, respect, and sincere reverence? In the New Testament, Romans 8:28 states, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (*English Standard Version*, 2016).

Christians make crucial daily decisions impacting many people's lives in their work environment, community, or global frontier. It is the Will of God to work together in unity, serve our purpose in life, and extend a helping hand to others in need. In Scripture verse 1 Peter 3:8, "Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind" (*English Standard Version*, 2016).

In business, most Christian leaders base their decisions on the implications of their actions on fellow man's needs and the fulfillment of God's expectation of his righteousness. The Lord gave us the seeds; our responsibility is to serve our purpose and let the seeds grow, as everyone, in God's eyes, needs to grow in spiritual strength. According to Keller and Alsdorf (2012), "We are to see work as a way of service to God and our neighbor, and so we should both choose and conduct our work under that purpose" (p. 67). Marketing involves building trust and cordial relationships with others – God's people. There are numerous scripture references to faith, such as Psalm 37:5-6 shares, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will do this: He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun" (*English Standard Version*, 2016). The fruits of righteousness shall come from the seeds we sow in our lives and shall contain a promise of divine blessings and strengthen our faith in the providence of God.

Business Practice and Relationship to Cognate

Marketing is everywhere –at home, school, work, and personally. Marketing is a fundamental function of any successful organization, regardless of the firm's size. Marketing strategies touch every corner of the organization, from the C-suite to the administrative assistant greeting stakeholders at the front desk. Companies must employ, maintain, and improve organizational performance through measurable efficiencies to achieve and sustain a competitive

advantage strategy. In today's fast-paced global business world, engaged employees and influential leaders play a crucial role in the success of service organizations. Melovic et al. (2021) suggested that corporate leadership needs to consider the critical use of marketing metrics to evaluate the performance of employee outcomes of each business unit within the company. Additionally, the dynamics of employee performance seem to continue with new research and academic studies (Cain et al., 2018).

The business practices of this research paper concentrated on the principal marketing concepts of customer loyalty, which builds into a performance outcome of competitive advantage. Rogers et al. (2019) noted that many products and services fail because companies need to develop them from the proper perspective. Furthermore, companies spend too much time focusing on what they want to sell to the customer rather than the customer's needs. First, customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty are often considered the strengths of a successful company. In a research study by Khairawati (2020), an emphasis was noted on the importance of the product (services) and the organizations' quality development standards. The researcher considered the implications of customer loyalty programs, awarding points, or promo discounts as driving considerations for customer loyalty. Finally, the study concluded that providing benefits through customer loyalty programs directly impacts customer loyalty.

Varadarajan (2020) stipulated how recent customer insights relate to the development of real-time data for the understanding of the changing needs of customers (more of an "*outside-in"* strategy). Such action draws out actionable ideas for marketing strategies for consumer purchasing decisions. This research paper aimed to fill in the void of information between traditional marketing strategies based on customer satisfaction perceptions and new insights into applying inter-functional resources to create superior customer value. Kearney (2017) suggested

that filling a gap requires correctly identifying a problem. Furthermore, there needs to be a substantive degree of importance to gaining new knowledge that moves the researcher closer to understanding or resolving an issue. Savvy and well-informed consumers have many choices of products and services information at their fingertips.

Technology has allowed today's consumers to obtain real-time data on product information, pricing, and, in many situations, product comparison before the purchase. Jiang and McCabe (2021) explained the importance of designing marketing activities that interact with consumer-centric technology platforms, such as the Internet and Enterprise Resources Planning (ERP) programs. The researchers focused on three critical marketing considerations: sharing information through technology, building consumer trust, and developing long-term customer commitments.

The researcher in this study aimed to contribute marketing knowledge to service organizations that eventually cultivated new pathways toward customer loyalty and sustainable competitive advantage. As this study focuses on the hospitality and tourism industries, customer loyalty was the foundational construct leading to sustainable competitive advantage. Maury (2018) posited that companies could assess competitive advantage by analyzing an organization's resources and capabilities, such as its market position and competitive efforts, through its overall performance and profitability. In addition, Maury suggested that the organization's market share stability is another competitive capability. Finally, Lee and Park (2021) indicated that the age of the relationship between the company and the customer plays an integral role in customer brand loyalty.

Summary of the Significance of the Study

First, this section defined the summary of the significance of the study as it relates to the

research gaps within the pathways of employee-customer engagement and customer loyalty. This study attempted to reduce the knowledge gaps by discussing the interaction between employees and frontline leaders on the importance of subordinate engagement and customer trust. Next, the biblical implications section discusses Christians' role in reaching out to God's people with a helping hand under the Christian worldview. Furthermore, the last part of this section discussed the application of marketing in an organization's business practices. The marketing function is more than running ads or selling products; it's aligning the organizational goals with each departmental objective and blending them into the overall corporate vision to attain sustainable competitive advantage.

Section 2: Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review for this research study aimed to provide a critical synthesis of information between the existing body of knowledge and the qualitative findings of the research data. The research framework acted as a conceptual roadmap on how the literature review works within the theoretical lens of the study. In addition, the framework formulated new knowledge and filled a gap where critical knowledge may have been missing. Research gaps can be viewed as unanswered questions that need to be answered. Within the scope of research, these gaps often impede the researcher's ability to achieve a clear conclusion (Kearney, 2017). Most literature review articles used in this study have been published in the past five years to ensure the current scholarly context. Furthermore, the literature review examined the relevance of the study's research questions. Finally, the literature review framework applied the study's constructs and theories to previous academic knowledge.

The researcher explored how service organizations gain a competitive advantage by building on the pathway from customer satisfaction to customer loyalty, resulting in a sustainable

competitive advantage. In addition, effective leadership behaviors, such as employee communications and engagement, were identified as critical performance drivers for maintaining a customer's level of loyalty. The net outcome for these service organizations is built on enduring customer commitment to better position the organization for sustainable competitive advantage. Davis and Nag (2020) contended that increased service industry competition has led to the technological development of new business models. In addition, business model innovation has gained academic relevance in recent years, primarily because successful implementation is often associated with sustainable competitive advantage (Afuah, 2019).

This section comprised related literature review studies, mostly recent peer-reviewed articles synthesizing the concepts and constructs in collaboration with addressing the problem statement. The presentation of the literature review followed the constructs outlined in the conceptual framework above, including (a) relationship marketing, (b) leadership behaviors, (c) customer satisfaction, (d) customer loyalty, and (e) sustainable competitive advantage. In addition, the related studies review thoroughly examined each section with the most current scholarly articles to develop common themes and identify gaps in existing knowledge. Furthermore, this approach in research helps supplement the presentation of findings and academic goals of the research paper (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Relationship Marketing

In this new post-COVID business environment, service industries need to understand and accommodate their customers' needs and wants in light of recent shifts in demand patterns (Akkaya et al., 2021). Approximately three decades ago, Peppers and Rogers (1993) averred relationship marketing as a more individualized collaboration to develop a joint interest in the customers' expected future value for the organization. Their research focused on the share of the

customer instead of the market share. Peppers and Rogers posited that a one-to-one relationship with your customers could lead to the principle of repeat purchases – which they defined as the more you sell to one customer, the easier future sales to the same customer. In the 21st century, their research concept remains one of the chief cornerstones of marketing principles since it is the least expensive method to sustain current customer needs rather than acquire new customers (Akkaya et al., 2021).

Motives. Another consideration associated with relationship marketing was the motives of both the customers and organizations. In a related study, Ndubisi and Natarajan (2018) pointed out that marketing relationships may have different reasons; for example, the strength of the relationship could depend on the customers' needs and how the organization can effectively satisfy the customer needs. Their research examined three customer-centric service industries: banking, healthcare, and hospitality. Their empirical study concluded that the long-term oriented relationship variables such as trust, fairness, and empathy could positively impact customer satisfaction and loyalty and indirectly affect customer relationship quality. Furthermore, Ndubisi and Natarajan contended that services such as in the healthcare industries require an ongoing consumer-provider relationship (e.g., doctor to patient).

Brand Experience. In another relationship-related study, Wiedmann et al. (2018) demonstrated that both motives and emotions build on the constructs of positive customer outcomes in the high-end luxury hotel industry. For example, their research focused on several multisensory influence factors, such as brand experience, customer perceived value, and brand strength, to develop an approach to address all senses as part of a causal relationship. Wiedmann et al. concluded that perceived value and perceived benefits are the antecedents of the brand experience. In the study of Arghashi and Yuksel (2022), an intrinsic motivation factor, such as

enjoyment, played a substantial role in the perceived benefit of the brand experience. Enjoyment of the experience and its benefits are foundational for a positive attitude to the brand. Therefore, the researchers concluded that intrinsic motivations are critically essential for the outcome of perceived benefits of the brand experience.

      Transitional Shift. Another relational study by Gummerus et al. (2017) posited that relationship marketing is a distinct paradigm shift from the single transactional encounter to a more contemporary brand relational perspective. Therefore, the research group labeled relationship marketing a sub-discipline of the marketing specialty. Gummesson et al. explained the evolution of relationship marketing from the one-to-one concept of the previous paradigm (the 1970s-2000s) to customer relationship management (CRM) programs and service sciences. Gummesson et al. defined this conceptual relationship as an increased significance of many-to-many networks and system theories. Furthermore, Gummesson identified these networks as the organization's customers, service suppliers, shareholders, and other stakeholders and the interaction between parties.

      Customer Relationship Management (CRM). In the early 1970s, customer relationship management (CRM) was introduced as combining business processes and consolidating consumer information to gain sustainable customer loyalty (Curcic et al., 2021). In the 1990s, Peppers and Rogers (1993) suggested that individual information on each customer benefits from the scale and scope of customer preference knowledge. Customer Relationship Management is one of the powerful information technologies (IT) tools for organizations to interact with their customer directly, build long-term relationships, and create operational efficiencies, all critical components leading to sustainable competitive advantage (Lamb et al., 2019). However, the pathway to a successful customer relationship marketing program has seen its share of

challenges over the past three decades. Curcic et al. posited that over 50% of CRM

implementations fail or organizations are dissatisfied with customer-centric technology. One

must ask why there is such a high failure/dissatisfaction rate. Some common reasons are lack of

leadership support, failure to redesign data processes, and difficulty with concept

implementation. Researchers have noted that successful CRM implementation is ranked at the

50% level, which results in an approximate 50% failure rate (Curcic et al., 2021).

In the hotel industry, Rahimi and Gunlu (2016) suggested that the CRM framework

concept needs to be viewed from two perspectives: technological and organizational culture.

First, the technology viewpoint supports previous research that reinforced the need to collect

pertinent customer data (internal processes), purchase behaviors, and variabilities of the target

marketplace (such as demographics and psychographics) in the external processes. Second,

Rahimi and Gunlu explained the leadership needs to support the CRM process during

implementation. Furthermore, based on the findings of this study, leadership must create a

positive and pleasurable environment, which is critical in the hospitality industry since the

business involves direct employee interaction with customers to deliver quality services. Finally,

Rahimi and Gunlu concluded that CRM should not be considered as just another tool in the

toolbox but more of a tangible resource to understand your customer needs and improve the

performance totality of the organization. Sigala (2018) supported the finding that technological

advances transform traditional CRM into a social CRM environment.

Social Media. In a study by Al-Gasawneh et al. (2022), the researchers studied the

importance of social media CRM performance and marketing performance and the development

of interactive relationships within the hospitality industry. The researchers suggested that

organizations must realize that direct customer engagement is a primary benefit of social media.

Kim and Wang (2020) posited that the net outcome of an effective CRM system is the organization's ability to optimize company goals and fulfill customer service needs. In the framework of CRM technology, an organization can use its available customer data (internal) to evaluate its marketing performance (Kim & Wang, 2020). The researchers built their empirical hypothesis on the relationship between the organization's performance and the CRM technology's capabilities. Kim and Wang concluded that the research outcome depends on an interdependent relationship between social CRM and the firm's performance outcomes. Sigala (2018) added that co-creation and social media are valuable tools for evolving social CRM. Therefore, the organization can focus on developing robust customer relationships through social media technologies. Successful CRM implementation makes it easier for hospitality businesses to collect, store, and evaluate guests' information and effectively be involved with co-creating quality services to meet the needs of their patrons (Al-Gasawneh et al., 2022).

       Perceived Value. In today's world of intense competition, customers now have limitless resources to evaluate the quality of service and utility of the perceived value before consuming such service. For example, consumers needing hotel accommodations in Europe can readily obtain factual information before booking a hotel reservation. According to Hu et al. (2009), previous research in the hotel industry focused on service quality, overall satisfaction, and the perceived value of the experience. As part of their theoretical framework, Hu et al. suggested that the customer's perception and understanding determine the perceived value and that perceptions often vary based on a consumer's previous knowledge or experience of the service. Therefore, Hu et al. concluded that hospitality management should focus on customer satisfaction results and improving the consumers' perceived value of their expertise (Hu et al., 2019). Furthermore, such actions by hospitality leaders must promote more word-of-mouth referrals and an improved

 competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Bravo et al. (2019) contended that hotel leaders accept positive word-of-mouth (WOM) feedback on perceived value since these leaders are often skeptical of the validity of negative WOM comments. Hollebeek et al. (2022) suggested that customer perception value (CPV) is based on a service's customer experience, which leads to WOM repurchase behaviors. In their empirical study, Hollebeek et al. studied the relationship between the moderating variables of functional needs, customer experience, and customer perceived value, which fosters the theoretical contribution to WOM behaviors. Hollebeek et al. concluded that positive WOM communication contributes to a strong customer experience. Conversely, hospitality managers must shift their utilitarian value to a customer experience priority to preclude negative WOM communication behaviors.

Wang and Wu (2012) explained that in the service industry, quality can sometimes be difficult to perceive in the pre-purchase phase. Therefore, customers are more apt to switch services unless there's some level of trust, often associated with previous experience and length of the relationship with the customer. Wang and Wu contended that while perceived value and customer experience play a critical role in cultivating customer loyalty, the length of the relationship plays a more crucial role in customer retention. Does the length of the customer relationship matters?

Length of Relationship. Lee and Park (2021) postulate that businesses must follow the fundamental understanding of relationship marketing rather than pursuing short-term profits. The researchers reviewed the relationship marketing outcomes of 947 guests at 5-star brand hotels. As the context for their research, Lee and Park studied the two constructs: the age (duration) of the relationship with hotel chain customers and the guests' perception of customer equity. The

study explores the relationship between these constructs and their linkage to building sustainable customer loyalty (Figure 2). Lee and Park conclude that hospitality leadership must focus on customer equity and continuous customer relationship building to maximize long-term customer perceived value. Amoaka (2019) states that the length of relationship marketing needs to increase brand equity, building on the antecedents of trust, commitment, and effective customer communication. Furthermore, relationship marketing can be considered a win-win relationship, building on consistent contact between the company's brand and its customers (Amoaka).

Figure 2

Proposed Hospitality Relationship Age Model
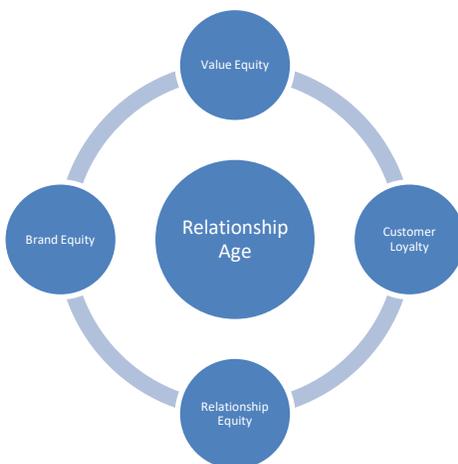
In related research with hospitality hotel entities, Hu et al. (2009) developed a conceptual model that explores the relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and perceived value, along with the fourth construct of consumer behavioral intentions. Hu et al. noted an interrelation link between their research's four statistically significant constructs. Though some were direct and others more indirect, the researchers suggest organizations need to understand that customer value is perceived by the consumer rather than an objective attempt by marketing professionals. Hu et al. conclude that customer satisfaction is developed on the two precursors of perceived

value and quality of the service experience. Their results confirmed that high-quality services lead to sustainable customer satisfaction and superior perceived value.

The perceived value construct has been extensively researched in the past two decades. Itani et al. (2019) suggest in their research findings that hospitality firms need to focus more on the customers' experiences and their perceived value of the experience. For example, engaged hotel customers spend an average of 46% more annually than disengaged customers. (Itani et al., 2019).

Personalization. Personalization is considered one of the most effective methods for service entities to develop long-term customer relationships (Banyte et al., 2016). The researchers recognize how personalization combines the organization's value and customer satisfaction outcomes. However, the researchers stipulate that the interpretation of personalization is often challenging for service industry leaders. Banyte et al. emphasize that the importance of personalization depends on the level of direct contact that service employees have with their customers. This effort of direct communication is considered foundational to building long-term interpersonal relationships with valued customers. Their research examines the phenomenon's importance, especially assuming that personalized value propositions create a higher value for the customer. Furthermore, the higher value of personalization leads the organization to reach the end goal of customer loyalty (Benyte et al., 2016).

Within the hospitality industry, there is a need for more recent studies on personalization; most research has emphasized customer loyalty programs or switching barriers. One potential research challenge could be the need for data collection and the subjects' reluctance to provide personal information in the context of research privacy. Cloarec et al. (2021) suggested that personalization is a valuable marketing resource tool. Their relational research approach was

based on a better understanding of the tradeoffs between personalization- and privacy constructs. Cloarec et al. concluded that the Internet is the primary precursor of personalization, leading to consumers' happiness. In a related study, Lee (2021) stipulated that effectively collecting personal information offers superior organizational communication directly with the customer, creating an environment to maximize personalized services. Lee contended that the Internet and IT innovation allow customers to disclose personal information to attain more extraordinary, personalized services.

In a similar research study, Kotras (2020) argued that personalization is the moral framework for quantifying Big Data and its use in determining the practice of mass algorithm personalization (or the quality of mass client relationships). Kotras defined mass personalization as a dynamic business-to-business (B2B) tool using predictive algorithms to understand large organizations' consuming behaviors. Furthermore, Kotras contends that more research needs to be studied to understand the self-motivated goals of researchers and the assimilation of business-to-business Big Data.

Trust and Commitment. Previous research studies have shown that relationship marketing directly impacts how a company's long-term commitment can positively affect customer retention and subsequent loyalty. In their research study, Amoako et al. (2019) suggested that relationship marketing represents an evolution in strategy. The researchers defined this evolution as a unilateral response from the employees of an organization to inspire long-term customer relationships. Sheth (2017) postulated in his research that relationship marketing must shift from the customers' share of wallet to the percentage of the customers' heart perspective. Furthermore, companies must evolve from a transactional perspective with their consumers to a more holistic, relational understanding of their customers' needs.

Some authors have suggested the importance of the Commitment-Trust Theory, which is integral to relationship marketing. This theory has also been explored in prior studies; however, it is more notable by Morgan and Hunt (1994). In their research, Morgan and Hunt (1994) suggested that trust and commitment are the behavioral characteristics and building blocks for successful, long-term relationships. The work of Morgan and Hunt contended that communications and cooperation are the antecedents of trust and commitment in relational marketing. As a result, relationship marketing attracts, maintains, and enhances effective customer relationships through empowered employees. Furthermore, in a study by Zhang and Geng (2018), the concept of the commitment-trust theory supports an understanding that employee empowerment creates an increased level of trust and commitment between the employees and the company's leadership. Zhang and Geng contended that when employees feel supported by their organization, there's often a higher level of awareness and job performance.

Numerous literature review studies have shown the impact of commitment and trust on customer satisfaction. For example, in empirical research by Rather et al. (2019), the researchers developed an integrative and relational-based model to synthesize crucial concepts in relationships. Their relational concepts focused on the customers' trust in the brand, an affective commitment to the brand, and customer behavioral intent of loyalty. As a result, they concluded that service customers would provide word-of-mouth recommendations to their family and friends, leading to the achievable outcome of customer loyalty.

In recent research studies, Nora (2019) examined how trust and commitment interact with long-term relationship management within the banking service industry. Nora suggested that customer intimacy, a relationship construct first studied by Treacy and Weiserman in 1996, creates a strong bond for establishing trust and subsequent repurchase of services. Nora argued

that trust is the antecedent for a commitment since trust is essential in establishing commitment in relational exchange. Furthermore, the empirical data in her research indicated that customer intimacy and trust had more critical value to the customer than customer knowledge. Nora concluded that customer intimacy is essential since affection relationships encourage customer loyalty and significantly influence the intention to repeat a purchase decision. In the hospitality industry, customer intimacy has numerous advantages to understanding the needs and wants of your customers, building on that knowledge, and sustaining long-term relationships to keep the customer returning to your business location. Amoako et al. (2019) postulated that commitment helps facilitate the dual connection between consumer trust and customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry.

Leadership Behaviors

Organizational leadership is one of the driving factors in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Daft (2018) described that leadership can be a learned process. However, many leaders struggle with letting go of the past paradigm of control and leaping into the new paradigm of trust, collaboration, and empowerment. This failure is attributed to the managers' need for soft skills (human skills) rather than hard (technical) skills. Daft suggested that leadership's 'soft skills' should complement those hard management skills since both are essential for developing an effective leader. Ribeiro et al. (2019) suggested that authentic leadership develops as a senior-level individual who demonstrates a high degree of personal ethics and self-integrity. In addition, these leaders must demonstrate the ability to communicate clearly and practice transparency and openness in interactions with followers to accomplish their personal and established organizational goals.

In their research study, Joplin et al. (2019) examined the three latent variables of ethical leadership, employee engagement, and employee entitlement, all serving as antecedents to overall employee satisfaction. Joplin et al. conducted their study with 243 hospitality supervisor-employee workers (n=243). Their findings suggested that these three variables lead to theoretical contributions to employee satisfaction. Joplin et al. commented that ethical leaders share straightforward and clear expectations. If leadership has succinctly communicated those expectations, employees should be held accountable for their actions.

In addition, leaders must express the importance of acceptable behavior and doing the job correctly the first time. Kerse (2021) contended that ethical leaders know how to behave and be respectful to their employees. Such proactive leadership behavior commonly creates a trusting and honest work environment. Furthermore, ethical leadership is the inherent ability to display doctrinaire attitudes in personal interactions. In return, it demands that the employees act the same. The combined goal is to develop an organizational fit with sustainable trust and high-performance outcomes (Kerse, 2021).

Leadership Communications. In today's competitive business environment, effective communication is essential in achieving the mission and goals of different service organizations. Ammari et al. (2017) explained that the communication process between leadership, followers, and their customers consists of a dependable cycle of information exchange with shareholders. Ammari et al. contended that effective communication between all stakeholders during service encounters assists in resolving potential problems, usually intrinsic feedback in the interchange of knowledge and information. Thelen (2021) suggested that effective communications feedback involves leadership ensuring that employees capture and maintain the correct message and

disseminate a concise statement of the expected performance standards, in conjunction with a sense of recognition for their performance efforts.

Tareque and Islam (2020) posited that leadership behavior directly impacts the organization's performance (and employees) and the successful implementation of its strategic plan. Within the context of their research, Tareque and Islam studied the relationship between various leadership behaviors, such as task-oriented, change-oriented, and people-oriented behavior, based on their conceptual framework. Tareque and Islam concluded that the results are often situational, based on the leader's behavior. For example, leaders who exhibit positive behavior and effectively lead their subordinates often achieve their desired objective or goal. In a related study, deVries et al. (2010) conducted empirical research to explore the communication styles of charismatic, task-oriented, and human-oriented leadership styles in conjunction with leadership outcomes. In their study, deVries et al. found that human-oriented leaders are often associated with a supportive communication style and a lack of verbal expressiveness. In comparison, charismatic leadership was profiled by the communication characteristics of being self-assured, supportive, and verbally non-aggressive, to name a few. In addition, deVries et al. suggested that task-oriented leaders are characterized by their high sense of need for preciseness and assuredness. In a correlated study, Tareque and Islam (2020) indicated that task-oriented leaders are focused on the task itself, the performance of the undertaking, and meeting the mission's objective. The following section reviews and discusses leadership styles in more detail.

Leadership Styles. Numerous empirical studies on leadership styles and approaches to employee interactions have been conducted in most business fields, including the hospitality industry. In earlier psychological research, the study of leadership observed the need to identify a

set of personality traits that distinguished the characteristics of leaders from non-leaders. According to Bauer and Erdogan (2021), one of the more credible assessments to evaluate a leader's unique personality profile was the "Big Five" model, coupled with a leader's IQ score. These Big Five personality traits include extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism. The researchers concluded that these personality traits predict leaders' motivation to motivate their employees by leading through example. For example, a restaurant's general manager could join their team to help clean the dining area after hours to help get their employees home earlier. In addition, self-esteem and integrity are critical traits for effective leadership (Bauer & Erdogan, 2021).

What would be considered the best leadership style? Several contingency theories were studied by specifying the situation within the leadership style. According to Bauer and Erdogan (2021), one of the earliest pioneers of contingency theory was Fredrick Fiedler, who coined his concept, the Fiedler Contingency Theory. According to Fiedler's approach, people respond differently in different situations (Bauer & Erdogan, 2021). Another contingency approach developed by Kenneth Blanchard and Paul Hershey is commonly known as situational leadership theory. Bauer and Erdogan argued that employee readiness is an essential consideration in Situational Theory, and leaders must practice different leadership styles depending on employee development level. Thompson and Glaso (2018) agreed that effective leadership often shifts with changes in employee development, such as the leader taking a low supportive role with higher directive behavior.

Path-Goal Theory. Robert House developed the Path-Goal Theory based on the expectancy of motivation (Bauer & Erdogan, 2021). This theory suggests that subordinates are motivated when an employee's high-performance leads to a reward, and their effort leads to high

performance. Under the Path-Goal Theory, leaders clear any obstacles to create a motivational

environment for their employees (Bauer & Erdogan, 2021). For example, a Path-Goal leader

would set the sales goals for their sales staff, support the team during the execution of their task,

and remove any obstacles encountered by the sales staff that could preclude them from achieving

the desired goal. Rana et al. (2019) contended that within the Path-Goal Theory, the leader must

supplement any missing situation component, allowing for increased employee satisfaction and

work performance.

        Servant Leadership. One can ask how effective servant leadership would function in the

hospitality industry. Servant leadership in the service industry builds on empowering employees'

needs, linking them to decision-making, and supporting their professional development (Chon &

Zoltan, 2019). In addition, the researchers suggested that servant leaders must promote positive

values and project a fair and honest environment that collectively benefits the employees and the

organization. In their quantitative findings, Chon and Zoltan discerned that the followers'

perception of leadership trust was more robust under servant leadership than in the authentic

leadership style. In contemporary leadership, trust and respect are the most common

denominators of any leadership style. The critical factor of trust is for the leader to establish a

perception of fairness, integrity, and predictability with their subordinates (Bauer & Erdogan,

2021).

        Furthermore, this perception led to a positive impact on the overall performance outcome

of the followers. Wang et al. (2018) averred that servant leaders demonstrate their positive values

and desire to serve the needs of their followers. In their findings, these service employees must

be imparted with a high degree of motivation and transform behavior to suit the needs of others

(customers) and improve organizational performance and competitive positioning (Wang et al., 2018).

Transformational Leadership. Another relational leadership theory is transformational leadership. According to Sultan (2020), many scholars believe transformation theory is the most common in this new era of inspirational motivation and change management drivers. Zhu et al. (2018) argued that over forty percent (40%) of major academic leadership research studies deal with transformational or charismatic leadership theories. Daft (2018) defined a transformational leader as having the ability to lead change through their vision and long-term strategic planning while promoting the need for continuous innovation of products and services. What role does transformational leadership play in the hospitality service industry?

Gui et al. (2020) discovered cultural differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultural societies. The research framework is built on the moderators of cultural differences, measurement styles, varied data sources, and time lag in data collection. Gui et al. postulated that their findings were inconsistent; however, the researchers found a correlation that transformational leaders perform more on relationship building in collectivistic societies. In contrast, transformational leaders found a direct correlation between employee satisfaction, organizational performance, and climate in individualistic cultures. Therefore, they concluded that other new leadership styles, such as servant, humble, and paternalistic, may be more appropriate for the hospitality industry.

Transactional Leadership. What is transactional leadership, and how effective would this theory pertain in the hospitality industry? Transactional leadership is an exchange process between leaders and their employees. According to Daft (2018), transactional leaders must recognize the needs of their followers and establish a reward for completing the task. In contrast,

leaders benefit from the completion of the assignment. Daft suggested that transactional leaders focus on the current situation versus transformational leaders, who focus on the organization's vision. Tareque and Islam (2020) posited that transactional and transformational leadership theories positively affect employee commitment. In a research study by Sobaih et al. (2022), the researchers postulated that transactional leadership often controls employee behavior by incentivizing (or disincentivizing) employees to change their behavior. Sobaih et al. confirmed that transactional and transformational leadership theories impact organizational commitment.

Charismatic Leadership. Charismatic leadership theory was first developed in 1922 by Max Weber as a character trait for authority who leads and inspires others (Spoelspra, 2020). Charismatic leadership is built on solid communication skills, pervasiveness, inspiration, and a sense of charm. Daft (2018) defined charismatic leaders as having an emotional impact on their subordinates while inspiring them to do more than they would normally do to achieve their goals. Freihat (2020) posited that little research exists on charismatic leadership in the hospitality industry; however, transformational and charismatic leaders share the same traits to inspire employees to go above and beyond their regular duties and take them to the next level. Since service industries, such as hospitality and tourism, directly interact with their customers face-to-face, charisma characteristics can inspire employees to do better at their tasks and improve customer satisfaction. Daft suggested that charismatic leaders often deal with the status quo and inspire others to do better instead of creating a new path. Charismatic leaders know how to interact with every hierarchy of the organization, from senior management to entry-level employees (Daft). What happens when leadership is the actual owner of the entity?

Business Ownership. According to Putra and Cho (2019), many hospitality entities are small businesses with 50 or fewer employees, managed by the owners, and involved with every

aspect of the daily management functions. Putra and Cho suggested that every leadership style in the hospitality industry appreciates the daily needs and varied situations in today's small restaurant businesses. In their qualitative study, the researchers explained that most small restaurant businesses are managed by the owners, most of whom are overwhelmed with the daily management of the establishment (Putra & Cho, 2018). In a quantitative study by Vignoli et al. (2018), researchers argued that some demonstrate a dichotomy between leadership style and outcome performance, the employees' well-being, and the functional characteristics of the team, sometimes contrary to each other. In a review of the various leadership styles exhibited in today's hospitality businesses, a blend of several styles, such as charismatic and transformational, may be the most effective, contingent on situational and cultural differences.

Employee Engagement, Empowerment & Commitment. The hospitality industry has undergone significant transformation in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the most considerable challenges for organizations have been retaining and engaging employees in the focused mindset of providing superior hospitality services. Joplin et al. (2019) argued that sometimes, employee entitlement could lead to low employee empowerment and questionable ethical leadership, resulting in lower job performance with staff. Current business management literature identified employee engagement as an interdependent contrivance of human capital that produces a competitive advantage for a business entity (Joplin).

Hammadi et al. (2021) explained how some organizations have created fun-time experiences to enhance employee engagement. The researchers suggested that job satisfaction significantly increases and improves emotional well-being when frontline employees (FLE) engage with their jobs (and the customers). For example, Hammadi et al. contended that new

technologies had created an environment for managers to use game-based design principles (gamification) to make work experiences more enjoyable for front-line employees.

Engagement. How can employers structure an engaging and fun work environment for their employees? A study by Bowen et al. (2020) suggested that workplace fun often leads to a verifiable impact on employee satisfaction and subsequent employee retention. In addition, Bowen et al. suggested that other crucial factors of a pleasurable workplace have been linked to improved employee service performance, employee engagement, and people-oriented culture. Joplin et al. (2019) posited that employees engaged with their job duties (and customers) have a higher sense of motivation and are willing to devote the time and effort to perform expected services at their optimal performance level. Bowen et al. suggested that engaged employees sharing fun workplace activities can foster creative experiences. Such experiences lead to more memorable experiences and positive customer perceptions since most consumers can pick up on positive employee behavior and an atmosphere of fun and excitement for the customers (Bowen et al., 2020). For example, loyal customers are your repeat customers who want to recreate a positive experience. One essential function of employee engagement is the element of empowerment.

Empowerment. Another critical element of leadership behaviors was how employee empowerment impacts sustainable customer satisfaction. Zhang and Geng (2018) expanded on the commitment–trust theory, which suggested that service industry leaders must understand the duality of employee empowerment and autonomous decision-making practices. For example, real-time activities empower restaurant managers to resolve customer complaints immediately. If a server delivers a steak overcooked by the chef, the problem must be fixed without question. Castro-Casal et al. (2019) suggested that employee empowerment of frontline staff plays a

critical role in problem resolution within the competitive hospitality industry. The researchers further contended that empowering frontline service staff gives these employees a sense of teamwork and participation in some of the decision-making processes while contributing to the performance and success of the establishment. Castro-Casal et al. postulated that empowering employees is the first step; providing proper training in customer service builds on the elements of employees' job commitment and well-being.

Murray and Holmes (2021) suggested that the supply and demand of talented hospitality management personnel around the globe are scarce in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the framework of their research studied employee empowerment and organizational commitment constructs from the perspective of reduced workforce attrition. Before their research, there were significant studies on hospitality organizations' employee empowerment and organizational commitment theories. Furthermore, Murray and Holmes's findings were consistent with prior studies; hospitality and tourism entities must be able to reduce their employee turnover rates by creating meaningful work and adopting a sense of belonging for their employees.

Ibrahim (2020) contended that the two antecedents of employee employment and commitment lead to the overall satisfaction of hospitality industry consumers. In his study, Ibrahim utilized the Measuring Empowerment Questionnaire (MEQ), which has established itself as a reliable and valid measuring instrument, with a sample of 290 respondents in 55 hotel facilities. In addition, survey questions for measuring organizational commitment were adopted using the Three-Component Employee Commitment (TCM) Survey. Ibrahim concluded that when employees believe they are part of an organization and exhibit a high level of choice and meaning in their work performance, they are likelier to demonstrate a higher level of

organizational commitment.

Although recent hospitality research studies have focused on the relationship between employee empowerment and leadership behaviors, only some have explored the three dimensions of employee empowerment, leadership, and organizational commitment. According to Namasivayam et al. (2014), hospitality researchers analyzed many theoretical approaches to these three dimensions. First, the researchers suggested combining employee data with customer outcomes is often challenging for hospitality entities. Second, researchers sometimes find it easier to extrapolate data by synthesizing their biases into the study. However, service practitioners and researchers agreed that satisfied and highly engaged employees positively impact customer satisfaction (Namasivayam et al., 2014). Through empirical findings, Namasivayam et al. concluded that empowering leadership behaviors can directly affect employee commitment and indirectly impact customer satisfaction. J.W. Marriott, the founder of Marriott Hotels, once said, "A happy employee is a happy guest" (Namasivayam, p. 72). Vignoli et al. (2018) contended that a less stressful work environment would benefit employees. Undoubtedly, organizational leadership would benefit from less employee burnout and higher performance outcomes. Furthermore, administration can systematically improve customer loyalty in service-related industries when performance outperforms past customer experiences.

Emotional Intelligence. In 1990, Solovey and Meyer were the first to coin the term "emotional intelligence," which has evolved over the past three decades. Voola et al. (2004) defined emotional intelligence as the essential ability of influential leaders to understand their own and subordinates' emotions. Richard Branson is an excellent example of a leader with resilient emotional intelligence in a highly competitive market like aviation transportation. Voola et al. explained that Mr. Branson, through his Virgin Airlines company, was able to gain 30% of

the Australian airline market when his shareholders and employees were skeptical of his overarching endeavor (Voola et al., 2004).

Stoyanova-Bozhkova et al. (2022) stipulated that self-awareness of one's emotions and the leadership skills to interact with subordinates must be critical behavior characteristics when working in such a diverse and multicultural industry as hospitality and tourism. Stoyanova-Bozhkova et al. suggested that emotional intelligence " comprises five domains: self-awareness, self-motivation, self-management, empathy, and social competence" (p. 363). Their research concluded that synthesizing all these domains added value to the managers' emotional intelligence abilities and conceptualized them into the organization's compelling performance and competitive advantage.

Tareque and Islam (2020) suggested that the dynamic interaction between leadership behaviors and emotional intelligence plays a significant role in competitive advantage. The researchers examined the two variables of task-oriented leadership and people-oriented leadership to determine the most effective pathway toward sustainable competitive advantage. In conclusion, gender differences were noted in leadership behavior and emotional intelligence outcomes as crucial to competitive sustainability.

Customer Satisfaction

According to Conway and Briner (2015), customer satisfaction was one of the most extensively researched business subjects based on the theory on consumer behavior principles. Previous peer-reviewed literature research suggested that long-term commitment to sustain customer satisfaction depends on the type of service business and the organizational service area. Enhancing customer satisfaction is the most crucial objective of any organization while creating enhanced customer loyalty and sustaining competitive advantage.

Total Quality Management (TQM). Previous research studies at the turn of the 21st century suggested that TQM principles could only apply to manufacturing (or production) organizations. Anil and Satish (2019) approached their empirical research using the TQM (Total Quality Management) platform, delineating TQM customer satisfaction indicators to service performance outcomes. Pattanayak et al. (2017) explained that perceived service quality (SQ) holds more prominence in the service industries, such as banking, tourism, and hotel industries. The higher significance level was partly due to service characteristics, such as intangibility and customer participation in service industry products. Pattanayak et al. concluded that service leadership must view total quality management by focusing on all organizational stakeholders.

Worlu et al. (2019) suggested that the recent surge in total quality management (TQM) practices is partly due to increased global competition and the need for organizations to recognize and adopt new operational processes to improve customer satisfaction. Worlu et al. argued that TQM practices must emphasize leadership's instrumental role in successfully implementing a TQM program. Senior leadership and frontline managers must believe in the TQM concept and promote their commitment to all organizational stakeholders. Furthermore, Worlu et al. concluded that previous research ignored the measurable outcome of customer loyalty, which leads to the end objective of implementing a TQM program.

Technologies. As a result of new business regulations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the service industries, such as hospitality and tourism, experienced a paradigm shift in customer interaction and subsequent satisfaction. For example, Tai et al. (2021) suggested that technology trends have shifted from 'high-tech' and 'low-touch' platforms over the past two years. Examples are self-check-in kiosks in hotels, keyless room entry, no personal interaction with restaurant takeout services, and staggered gym schedules, to name a few (Tai et al.). According

to Hao and Chon (2021), contactless services are not an innovation due to the COVID-19 crisis; however, it did expedite the need for hospitality organizations to implement these "seamless" technologies. As a result, the hospitality industry shifted from a brand-centered market to a more customer-centric environment.

According to Hao and Chon (2021), a lack of direct contact with the customer created the need for hospitality organizations to provide a more favorable experience to achieve the goal of customer delight. Lee and Lee (2020) explained that South Korea had coined the word "untact," which means "no contact," for contactless service businesses. The researchers suggested that due to the growing number of single-person households in their country, untact services offer unique opportunities. Lee and Lee contended these untact services cater to single consumers who look more at the personal experiences and simplicity in the transaction (e.g., young college students are ordering food online) as the measure to develop a favorable win-win situation with these customers. Tai et al. (2021) further contended that untact services are for the technology-savvy, young professionals who are often introverts, dislike traditional shopping practices and prefer solo shopping experiences. Do these new experiences lead to customer co-creation?

Co-Creation. Buhalis and Sinatra (2019) focused their exploratory research on the impact of hospitality and tourism customer interaction (or co-creation) within social media platforms. Their findings suggested that service organizations are beginning to understand how customers are often willing to spend more money if they can be involved with real-time co-creation to enhance personalized value and delivery of quality services. In addition, Buhalis and Sinatra suggested that significant hospitality brands, such as Marriott Hotels and KLM Airlines, have increased organizational performance and customer satisfaction by engaging their employees with real-time action-based consumer data. Solakis et al. (2021) suggested that

through the new concept of customer Value Co-Creation (VCC), hospitality providers need to adopt effective consumer engagement protocols to develop technology platforms that collect and analyze valuable consumer data to learn and react to the dynamic needs of customers. The researchers suggested that such technology could be through apps or social media platforms, with the derived data becoming available for customized services for hospitality guests.

Foroudi et al. (2018) suggested that intelligent technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets, etc.) played a pivotal role in the service customer shopping experience, along with more consumer-specific targeting approaches to enhance the dynamic shopping experience. For example, Foroudi et al. explained that innovative technologies must provide tech-savvy consumers with online accurate, timely, and comparative information to facilitate a positive shopping experience and embrace the expectation of repeat business. Foroudi et al. concluded that intelligent technology had no generational limits; senior consumers use these innovative technologies to gain knowledge on medical concerns, while business executives use the same technology to book airline reservations for an upcoming board meeting.

Employee Service Innovations. Rao et al. (2018) defined employee service innovations as an organizational decision to bring new services, products, methods, and processes through the mediating role of employee empowerment to gain greater customer satisfaction. Previous research studies focused chiefly on technology-based innovation; however, employee service innovation is foundational concerning customer satisfaction. For example, Zhou and Zhang. (2017) examined the impact of how several 5-star hotel resorts employed employee service innovation to help their customers participate in the experience of services. The researchers found that employee empowerment often needs to be more congruent with its implementation processes across organizations. Due to their empirical study, Zhou and Zhan suggested there is

more of a relationship with the organization's climate of innovation rather than the empowerment processes.

Schuckert et al. (2018) suggested that in the hospitality domain, competition has required service frontline managers to encourage their employees to become more creative and innovative with the delivery of services. Schuckert et al. found that most creative employees are forward-thinkers and find new ways to resolve challenging workplace situations. The researchers suggested that despite the lack of empirical studies on service innovation behaviors (SIB), every service encounter was unique and required hospitality leaders to think outside the box and promote creative solutions to improve customer satisfaction. For example, senior management needed to promote authenticity as a plausible characteristic rather than transformational leadership traits. Schuckert et al. contended that this action would focus more on the employees' learning experience, typically seen in authentic qualities. Identifying these genuine qualities can be enhanced through communication and cultural development with the organization (Schuckert et al., 2018). In another related study, Al-Ababneh et al. (2021) suggested that as hospitality organizations face more challenging times in light of intensified competition, engaging your frontline employees has become paramount to resolving service issues and optimizing overall customer satisfaction promptly. Rao et al. (2018) suggested that employee empowerment improves the overall outcomes of service innovation behaviors. The research team shared that leaders and employees can share gained knowledge and experiences with fellow internal stakeholders, prompting trust, organizational commitment, and innovation behaviors (Rao et al.). Furthermore, these three elements are the antecedents to achieving and sustaining customer expectations.

Customer Expectations. Many successful organizations adopt marketing strategies focused on delivery systems for optimal customer satisfaction. In a study by Oh et al. (2022), the researchers built the context of their research on the psychological principles of the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT) and deep learning approaches to luxury hotel services. According to Oh et al., hotel service information starts with the providers and is developed through technology platforms to describe previous customer comments, surveys, and critiques (mostly eWOM) of such services and evaluate through extrapolated data on the actual confirmation of the customer's level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (Oh et al.). For example, customer expectations are high with four-star and five-star hotels before the consumer receives services. Often, these expectations are based on past experiences of the brand.

In another study by Slack and Singh (2020), the researchers suggested the gap between the elements of customer service performance and customer expectations lays the predicate for consumer satisfaction. This so-called "gap" defines the Expectancy-Disconfirmation Theory (EDT) concept. Slack and Singh suggested that positive confirmation occurs when the performance of services meets or exceeds expectations, while negative validation occurs when applied service performance is considered inferior. In a related study, Suchanek and Kralova (2019) discussed that customer expectations are associated with the perceived quality of a product or service in the eyes of the customer. However, the researchers argued that quality could not be constrained to sensory attributes; other contributing factors could be cost, safety, or the product's or service's utility (Suchanek & Kralova, 2019).

Through qualitative research, Fan-Chuan (2020) suggested that the Expectation-Confirmation Theory is a consumer behavior concept centered on the two dimensions of pre-purchase and post-purchase perceptions of satisfaction. More specifically, using the principles of

the Expectancy-Confirmation Theory built on the research framework for the behavioral constructs of expectations, confirmation, the perceived performance of a product or service, satisfaction, and post-purchase intent. Fan-Chuan outcomes explained the positive relationship between customer expectations, which serve as the antecedent to confirmation. Fan-Chuan concluded that the cognitive construct of satisfaction confirmation leads customers to positive post-purchase intentions to repeat a future purchase. Wen-Yu (2013) focused on combining the two constructs of expectations and confirmation, demonstrating the positive impact these constructs have on impulsive purchases. Furthermore, Wen-Yu concluded that utilitarian motivation is also a critical factor concerning consumers' dynamic of impulsive purchase behaviors.

In the hospitality industry, customer expectations are one of the driving forces leading to customer satisfaction. Bravo et al. (2019) suggested that top-brand hotel managers must understand the needs of their guests, deliver the most optimal and memorable experiences during their stay, and develop satisfaction and emotional synthesis to assess a practical positive experience and associate that experience with the brand. Bravo et al. examined 298 top-brand hotel guest respondents using telephone surveys and measuring core service, employee service, and servicescape constructs. Bravo et al. (2019) concluded that service perceptions and elicited customer emotions directly impact customer response towards a particular hotel brand. Oh et al. (2022) suggested that the antecedent of the Expectation-Confirmation Theory examined how 4–5-star hotel leaders needed to manage the disparity between perceived customer expectations. The actual service experienced by the customer where expectations are relatively high with premium brand association helped to build on customer equity.

Customer Equity. Kolter and Keller (2019) defined customer equity as having the most significant number of customers pay the highest price for a product or service. However, Kolter and Keller did qualify that brand equity and customer equity share many of the same attributes, such as creating customer value. Hao and Chon (2022) supported the theory that customer equity does have its flaws concerning the accuracy and forecast of cash flow; however, it continued to serve as a predictive indicator of customer satisfaction. For example, the marketing paradigm is shifting from a product or service perspective to a new customer orientation perspective. In the hospitality industry, your customer's overall satisfaction is based on their service experience and trust that their experience meets or exceeds expectations (Hao & Chon).

According to Rao et al. (2019), limited academic research focused on the impact of the customer experience in the service industry, less specifically on brands. The researchers discussed that customer satisfaction was evaluated from a singular, transactional encounter. For example, a family decides to visit a new restaurant for one night and assess the quality of food and services. However, Rao et al. stipulated that the customer experience was more holistic, looking into many attributes, such as the quality of the experience. Furthermore, Rao et al. explained that customer equity builds on the antecedents of relationship equity, brand equity, and value equity to achieve desired levels of customer satisfaction.

In a related study in the banking service sector, Gao et al. (2020) proposed that customer equity was central to understanding the customers' perception of the quality of their experience. The researchers suggested that customer equity can be framed under three measurable drivers: a service brand, perceived value, and relationship. The interdependent combination of these drivers helps determine future investments in an organization's marketing activities (Gao et al.). For example, in a 5-star hotel environment, Lee and Park (2021) explained that since it's impossible

to "try out" a hotel service before consumption, belief in brand equity plays an instrumental role in the perception of the value. Furthermore, hospitality service entities needed to rely on the age (length) of the relationship with the customer and the perceived value of the service to gain customer loyalty (Lee & Park).

Customer Loyalty

Academic researchers and hospitality practitioners consistently look for new and innovative marketing strategies to improve and sustain customer loyalty in successful organizations (Kandampully et al., 2018). Today, there is a plethora of credible research studies on customer loyalty. Substantive research on trust, commitment, satisfaction, and perceived value are antecedents to customer loyalty. Arslan (2020) defined customer loyalty as when a customer is satisfied with an offered product or service, develops a long-term trusting relationship with the organization, makes repeat purchase decisions, and helps promote the product or service to other potential customers. Likewise, Cudby (2020) suggested that companies must foster loyalty by defining their best customers, those who love your product or services, and engage in a long-term, mutually beneficial relationship. Communication is one of the most effective methods to ensure this long-term relationship.

Effective Communications with Customers. Melewar et al. (2017) examined the conceptual role of communications –specifically, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) and its strategic relations to trust, commitment, and loyalty. Consistent communication was crucial for delivering the right marketing message and building viable public and media relations. Melewar et al. posited that the duality of public relations and IMC helped cultivate consistency in communicating the message. Furthermore, gaining a competitive advantage requires communications to be succinct between internal and external stakeholders.

Pisicchio and Toaldo (2021) suggested that integrated marketing communications had a multi-purpose function, providing the consumer with product or service information before purchasing and operations as a direct dialogue with consumers. Pisicchio and Toaldo conducted their research with 250 small to medium-sized Brazilian hotels and evaluated the effectiveness of IMC. The researchers concluded that IMC acts as a moderator of marketing performance. Furthermore, Pisicchio and Toaldo suggested that IMC is a cross-functional process to align clean and concise company-wide information with their customers to nurture long-term relationships (Porcu et al., 2017).

In another study, Laurie and Mortimer (2019) examined the role of integrated marketing communications in retaining third-party advertising agencies. The researcher suggested that a stronger and more collaborative relationship needs to exist between the organization and the advertising entity to ensure trust and transparency of information to the customers. Laurie and Mortimer argued the need to cultivate an IMC culture between the agency and client organization, plenary supported by senior leadership to ensure the message's creativity and effective delivery to loyal customers. Laurie and Mortimer concluded that there were significant differences between outsourced and in-house communication functions, with the in-house function leading to more communication effectiveness and delivery of the correct message to the organization's customers. Furthermore, a lack of message consistency leads to consumer confusion and loss of customer trust and loyalty to the brand product or service (Kolter & Keller, 2019).

Loyalty Programs. Academic researchers continue to examine how effective company loyalty and rewards programs concerning consumer loyalty and retention. Undoubtedly, customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty were often considered the strengths of a successful

organization. A research study by Khairawati (2020) examined the critical factor of dedication to delivering the product or services and the organizations' quality development standards. Khairawati considered the implications of customer loyalty programs, awarding points, or promo discounts as driving considerations for customer loyalty. The context of his research involved surveying 110 retail customers using a qualitative questionnaire as their judgment sampling technique. The study concluded that providing tangible benefits through customer loyalty programs directly impacts sustainable customer loyalty.

Another review consideration on customer satisfaction was the consumer behavioral variables of endogeneity, whose effect could be part of loyalty programs. For example, will the customer purchase the service without loyalty or promotion discount? Or will the customer spend more money with the loyalty program? In a study by Rutz and Watson (2019), the researchers designed their empirical study around six marketing strategy constructs. Both decisions lead to the correlated variable of customer satisfaction, using both with and without a loyalty program. Rutz and Watson's findings concluded that non-experimental data often falls short, leading to endogeneity. Therefore, the case of deciding to implement a loyalty program was congruent with the program's benefits and the duality of customer satisfaction and perceived value.

How effective are company loyalty programs concerning actual customer loyalty? Do these loyalty programs work? Berezan et al. (2015) defined hospitality reward programs as optimizing customer loyalty by rewarding frequent-use customers with measurable benefits while sustaining long-term mutual relationships. Berezan et al. examined 1,519 hotel customer online reviews using traipadvisor.com and flyertalk.com, to name a few. Their grounded theory approach centered on the constructs of customer program fit and self-reported purchase

behaviors, using several of the antecedent drivers of loyalty (e.g., satisfaction, communications, trust, and perceived value). Berezan et al. concluded that not only do the antecedents of commitment present themselves in the customer comments, but the rewards program experience also depends mainly on how the customers understand and use the program. The program must elicit repeat purchase behaviors and reduce purchase anxiety that could lead to switching brands.

Repeat Purchase Intentions. Often, organizations spend their time and resources seeking creative ways to attract new customers. Cudby (2020) emphasized the application of the Pareto Principle (or 80/20 Rule) that 80 percent of your revenue comes from 20 percent of your customers. Interesting fact, however, do service industry leaders understand the significance of this principle? Dixon et al. (2011) stipulated that since current service customers are four times more likely to leave a service transaction disloyal than loyal, service-related activities account for most dissatisfaction with the potential of repeat business. According to Yu et al. (2021), retaining current customers to increase their visits to the establishment in the hospitality service industry was the most effective way to maintain business by saving time and expense. On the other hand, marketing and growth activities to attract new customers often involve more long-term and expensive efforts (Yu et al., 2021). Employees need to understand the importance of "making it easy" for customers to enjoy their experience; this improves overall business retention (Dixon et al., 2011).

Suchanek and Kralova (2019) focused their theoretical study on the relationship between the outcome variables of customer loyalty, satisfaction, product knowledge, and competitiveness, using the moderator of positive repeat purchase behavior. Their research sample consisted of 1,530 questionnaires from food industry customers, initialed using a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Suchanek and Kralova explained that loyal customers had desired repeat

purchase behavior over time. Furthermore, satisfaction and competitiveness were critical drivers

of customer loyalty, while product knowledge was a new indicator in the satisfaction-loyalty

model (Suchanek & Kralova, 2019). Their findings parallel Lee and Park's (2021) conclusion

that the maturation of the relationship over time can influence the driver of loyalty development

toward sustaining repeat purchase behaviors.

       Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory. The Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory has been extensively

examined and involves customer satisfaction and perceived loyalty to a preferred service, such as

hospitality services. Fu et al. (2018) argued that the Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory (SLT) builds on

the dual cognitive factors of perceived service quality and the perceived value of satisfaction.

Figure 3

Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory

In their analytical study, the researchers integrated the behavioral characteristics of the

Satisfaction-Loyalty Theory with the Expectancy-Confirmation Theory to evaluate thirteen (13)

out of seventeen (17) potential constructs proxy to customer loyalty. As a result, Fu et al.

suggested that perceived value had a more significant impact on overall satisfaction than the

construct of confirmation. Furthermore, Fu et al. concluded that the combination of perceived

value and confirmation ultimately reconciles perceived service quality towards overall

satisfaction.

       In a related study, Herhausen et al. (2019) posited the importance of creating a positive

experience during service delivery. Inspiring your customers during this experience level must

build customer loyalty and sustain competitive advantage. Fu et al. (2018) discussed the importance of the degree to which the fulfillment experience needs to be a positive (or pleasant) experience to gain the perceived value for a repeat purchase decision. How do frontline employees immediately know if customers had a positive experience? Herhausen et al. concluded that the relationship between multiple touchpoints with the customer along their journey could attract, promote, and retain customers for future purchases and long-term value.

Customer Equity/Customer Lifetime Value. First, let us consider each customer's lifetime value or equity. According to Armstrong and Kolter (2020), customer equity is simply the overall sum of all customer lifetime values of a brand. However, in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, hospitality researchers and practitioners needed to evaluate the purchase intention of past and future customers from a different perspective. For example, Gursoy and Chi (2020) argued that hospitality researchers had spent the past decade researching new technologies to improve operational efficiency and increase financial performance (such as expedited check-in service, etc.). In addition, Gursoy and Chi suggested that recent research aims to enhance customer relations and increase the long-term value of customers for the organization (customer lifetime value).

Lee and Park (2021) postulated that customer equity was a more concrete method to evaluate the lifetime value of customers. Customer equity must be viewed as a multi-dimensional process, with the two critical interdependent dimensions of attitudes and behaviors working in collaboration to achieve customer loyalty (Lee & Park, 2021). Another article by Reinartz and Kumar (2011) suggested that loyal customers cost less to serve since their acquisition cost is amortized overall by many customers and over time. The researchers studied the attitudinal effects of customer equity in a grocery store setting. Reinartz and Kumar found "that customers

who scored high on both actual and attitudinal loyalty measures generated 120% more profit than those whose loyalty was observed through transactions alone" (p. 116). In a related study, Gursoy and Chi (2020) suggested that more behavioral research is needed in the hospitality industry to help determine the customers' attitudes and behavior toward the proxy of customer lifetime values.

Customer equity is based on the organization's customers' quantifiable current and future value. It must be used to evaluate the marketing return on investment (MROI) of existing marketing efforts and the allocation of future marketing funds (Hao & Chon, 2022). Cudby (2020) explained that the first step in assessing customer lifetime value is to determine the characteristics of your customers. For example, who are your customers? Loyal customers, average customers, one-time customers - assess the profile attributes of your customers. Cudby added that measuring the lifetime value of your customers can determine the orientation of loyalty and could assist with helping the organization's leaders and employees understand the needs and demands of their customers. While evaluating part of customer purchase behavior can assist in determining customer equity, it is essential to predict future customer actions to synthesize the customer lifetime value equation (Cudby, 2020). Due to the ever-changing COVID-19 business environment in the hospitality industry, companies are faced with new challenges in understanding their customers' needs and cultivating them to keep abreast of customer loyalty demands and subsequent changes in brand equity.

Brand Equity. Armstrong and Kolter (2020) suggested that brand equity and customer equity share many common constructs; however, both emphasize different considerations. For example, brand equity seems to focus more on strategic issues, such as brand awareness and the overall brand image of the organization (Armstrong & Kolter). According to Yu et al., brand

image was crucial in evaluating consumer equity in the hospitality industry. For example, the appearance of a pleasant vacation experience on a remote beach enhances a positive emotional experience with the customer while contributing to future decision-making behavior and word-of-mouth support. How can brand equity complement the pathway to customer loyalty? But, "there are no brands without customers and no customers without brand" (Kolter & Keller, 2019, p. 268).

Ozkan et al. (2020) stipulated that a solid corporate image and a credible reputation lead to the synthesis of brand loyalty, especially in the service-related market. In a related study, Martinez and Nishiyama (2019) stipulated that brand name and image influence customer choices and future purchase intentions in hospitality services. Martinez and Nishiyama contended that a recognized brand name was an invaluable asset, building on the customers' perception of the service and corporate marketing strategy to reach that potential business segment. Ozkan et al. concluded that a brand's image and reputation are critical to the perceived value of service and subsequent customer loyalty.

Kolter and Keller (2019) stated that brand equity had fewer financial considerations than customer equity and emphasized developing marketing strategies and understanding your customers. Ozkan et al. suggested that consumer identification with a particular hospitality provider enhances the customer's affective commitment toward a preferred brand, based chiefly on the brand's reputation. Ozkan et al. (2020) findings supported the same conclusion as Martinez and Nishiyama (2019) contended that brand image and the credible reputation of a brand name are the antecedents to the pathway for loyal customers.

Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Michael E. Porter was one of the research pioneers viewing competitive advantage through the value chain lens, focusing on strategic improvement to enhance performance. The Porter Generic Theory of competitive advantage was based on the organizational resources and capabilities to create a superior performance for the product or service to optimize sustainable competitive advantage. For example, Porter (1985) explained that for a company to be sustainable, its products or services must be able to differentiate itself from its competitors. Bel (2017) posited that Porter's Generic Strategies hold resilient academic contributions to studying competitive advantage.

Differentiation. Kolter and Keller (2019) defined competitive advantage as "a company's ability to perform in one or more ways that competitors cannot or will not match" (p. 289). It seems like a straightforward and concise textbook definition but leaves the question of how service leaders can distinguish an organization's competitive advantage in the marketplace. Kolter and Keller suggested that customers needed to see any competitive advantage through the prism of differentiation; their perception of such a difference must be considered a customer advantage. Gonzalez-Torres et al. (2022) supported the perspective that one of the major driving forces of today's business differentiation was the concept of innovation. So, what makes your product or service stand out from your direct competitors? Gonzales-Torres et al. suggested that hospitality organizations must develop the most established and reliable relationships through strategic alliances or consortiums to ensure cooperation and suppliers' commitment co-exist in solid relationships.

Porter (1993) contended that differential changes in the value chain network must be performed simultaneously, leading to more purchasing clarity by consumers. Thompson et al. (2018) added in their findings that companies often revamp their value chain systems to reduce

costs in the delivery of services, reduce the number of people needed in the chain process, and streamline the delivery of suppliers. Such actions improve the organization's efficiency and help reduce costs for future pricing considerations. In further support, the researchers added that such differentiation activities include striving for innovation, implementing new technologies, and brand-building strategies. Furthermore, if the company can reduce service or product delivery costs, such cost savings must be passed on to the consumers to sustain the company's competitive positioning (Thompson et al., 2018).

Strengths & Positioning. One of the critical characteristics of a company's differentiation is the strength and competencies of the organization. Thompson et al. (2018) stated that "a strength is something a company is good at doing or an attribute that enhances its competitiveness in the marketplace. A company's strength depends on the quality of its resources and capabilities" (p. 94). One of the most effective methods to evaluate a company's strength was passing the VRIN/ VRIO internal analysis of sustainable competitive advantage. Peng (2017) explained that the VRIO framework, which is an acronym standing for Value (V), Rarity (R), Imitability (I), and Organization (O), evaluates the tangible and intangible resources and capabilities of an organization. For the sake of clarity, the VRIN acronym stands for Value (V), Rarity (R), Imitability (I), and Nonsubstitable (N). Peng suggested that combining all four of these VRIO/VRIN dimensions solidifies the effectiveness of sustainable competitive advantage. Koentjoro and Gunawan (2020) discussed the role of dynamic capabilities and how organizations need to employ their tangible and intangible resources to create an innovative environment.

Krishnan et al. (2020) provided one of the earliest discussions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and projected hotel revenue. Krishnan et al. suggested that U.S. hotel revenue (based on a per-room basis) could be down 20% by 2023, creating a mandate for

hospitality companies to evaluate their internal resources. Zahra (2021) explained how the

Relative-Based Value (RBV) Theory is built on the construct of a firm's resources and

capabilities and the importance of managing specific attributes that make the firm competitive in

the market. In a related study, Zaman et al. (2022) studied the competitive characteristics of nine

hotel rating criteria, such as bed quality, quality of Wi-Fi, comfort service, and value for money,

to name a few (see Figure 4). Their findings concluded that COVID-19 safety measures (15%),

quality of Wi-Fi connection (13%), and contactless service (13%) were the three highest-rated

attributes that hotel managers need to focus their attention on to improve performance.

Figure 4

Hotel Marketing Attributes
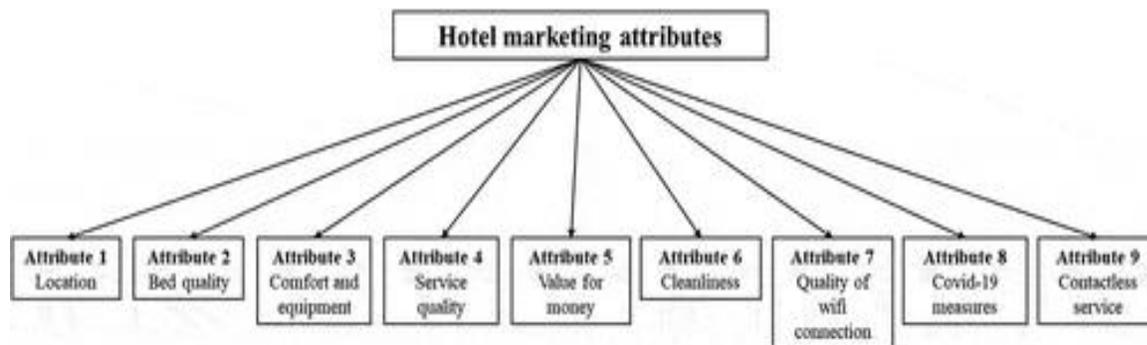
Data Management. In addition to the RBV, information management, and effective data

collection systems are critical components of competitive advantage. Shan et al. (2019)

explained that information technology (IT) and human resources capabilities are intangible assets

for the company. For IT resources to be practical, the organization must employ skilled

technical-level employees to successfully deploy the technologies and ensure proper training of

leadership and staff employee ranks. Jiang and McCabe (2021) explained the crucial role that

information technology plays in the dynamic capabilities of the tourism and hospitality

industries. For example, the researchers demonstrated that one criticism of existing research on

dynamic capabilities and IT management processes was adopting a status quo perspective. The

status quo perspective takes a static view of IT process changes. Jiang and McCabe concluded

that tourism was a complex industry that needed intelligent information technology, management

coordination, and cooperation between leaders and staff.

What would be an example of recent IT technology changes that improved customer

services? Hasan et al. (2021) suggested that most hotel guests prefer technology check-in

services rather than human interaction to keep social distancing protocols. The researchers

emphasized the importance of using long-term historical industry data in conjunction with

current economic data to evaluate new trends in consumer needs. Shan (2019) contributed that

the three dimensions of dynamic IT capabilities in a hospitality entity are 1) IT resources, 2) IT

relationship resources, and 3) idle resources. Furthermore, IT and relationship resources acted as

pivotal factors in IT development. Therefore, the compatibility of Big Data was critical for the

sustainability of competitive advantage.

Bartosik-Purgat et al. (2018) stated that the Internet, digitalization, and mobile marketing

initiatives often create a large amount of shambolic data. The researchers explained that it was

essential to correctly extrapolate and analyze the company's database and understand how to use

this invaluable resource to improve its competitive performance in its markets. However,

Bartosik-Purgat et al. suggested that data overload can sometimes challenge organizational

leaders' decision-making and pricing processes.

Strategic Pricing. How can price affect the competitive advantage of an organization?

First, consider pricing the only marketing mix element directly related to revenue. Hamenda

(2018) contended a connection between price equitability and customer satisfaction. The price

directly influences the decision-making process and collateral customer satisfaction in the

service industry. Hamenda concluded that this relationship between equitable pricing and customer satisfaction was an integrated price model, leading to earned customer satisfaction and sustainable loyalty. Falahat et al. (2020) contended that pricing strategy indicated a competitive correlation between the organization's performance and pricing capabilities.

In a case study on Rosen Hotels, CEO Harris Rosen stated, "You can not generate revenue with an empty room" (Thompson et al., 2018, p. C-354). This study focused on yield management, pricing that reflects a supply and demand for a product or service, which is popular in the hospitality industry. Kaura et al. (2014) contended that pricing fairness was a consumer understanding of a product or service's perceived price and actual price. Based on the perceived price principle, the actual price was based on the price's fairness and previous knowledge. Kaura et al. conclude that price was the antecedent to customer satisfaction and subsequent competitive advantage since service was an extrinsic evaluation of the quality of a product or service.

Customer Reciprocity. What is customer reciprocity, and how would this marketing principle improve a service provider's competitive advantage? Although not among the more common competitive considerations, customer-provider reciprocity plays an overarching role in the sustainability of competitive advantage. Teichmann (2021) defined customer reciprocity as a repeat purchase behavior of a customer in exchange for a positive and rewarding experience, such as a loyalty program. For example, restaurant servers spend more time with loyal customers to build that customer-company exchange by encouraging customers to spend more on the experience than expected. Teichmann analyzed more than 160 research studies and explored the customer relationship and their actual spending habit as the proxy for performance profitability. Teichmann concluded that positive reciprocators were more than likely engaged in good

behavior for the company, such as positive word-of-mouth, based on or in exchange for a positive experience between the customer and the hospitality organization.

In another related study, Morgan and Hunt (1994) defined relational marketing as "all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges" (p. 22). Ryu and Lee (2017) suggested the effects of Relational Marketing Investment (RMI) by analyzing the precursors of the perceived risk of the customer exchange. Based on the results of a Multiple Discriminant Analysis (MDA), Ryu and Lee identified in their empirical study that by analyzing service quality, relational benefits, and the interchange between the customer-company relationship, their findings distinguished specific characteristics between high-tiered RMI and low-tiered RMI. Ryu and Lee concluded in their research that in upscale restaurants, the development of the relational marketing investment perception was how these service entities could offer a long-term relationship exchange to sustain competitiveness in their market. Furthermore, the researchers suggested that service quality plays an instrumental role in the customer RMI, which, in turn, invokes notable reciprocal behaviors (Ryu & Lee, 2017).

Anticipated Themes

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in qualitative research, "themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 328). The researcher had identified three anticipated themes based on the literature review's analysis and this research paper's long-term goals:

- **Theme One** - Leadership Communications: This was an essential theme to monitor in this research study to determine the effectiveness of leadership's role in communicating with subordinates.

- **Theme Two** – Maintaining Customer Satisfaction: one of the stepping stones to long-term trust, commitment, and loyalty of customers.

- **Theme Three** – Sustaining Employee Engagement: Maintaining customer loyalty as a driving element to sustainable engagement between leadership and employees.

Discovered Themes

The researcher began to notice discovered themes early in the interviewing process. For example, one of the most frequently emergent themes was the importance of effective company communication. While completing the coding process in MAXQDA, the researcher conducted an in vivo coding review of the study findings from the participants' perspectives for the development of the themes. Therefore, a concerted effort of impartial review was applied to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. As a result of this case study, the following five themes and two subthemes were discovered beyond the original three anticipated themes noted in Section 1, which were discussed before the research phase of this study. The researcher found that some terms were interchangeable in developing the five themes, overlapping as subthemes that added significance to the case study.

Theme 1: Ensuring Proper Training

In the hospitality and tourism industries, leadership relies on frontline employees at all levels of job classification to deliver and maintain high-quality services to their customers. Johnson and Park (2020) stated that frontline service employees are the direct link between the organizational mission and operational strategy and the customers they service in their businesses. Their research focused on the importance of mindfulness-related training in the workplace to help increase relationship formation, team building, and employee well-being as an integral part of their daily routine and delivery of services. Johnson and Park concluded that

training is ideal for frontline service employees, considering there is little room for errors since

the production and consumption of services work simultaneously.

Theme 2: Teamwork

This research case study discovered the common theme of teamwork and collaboration.

Undoubtedly, teamwork is often the bond that holds most companies together and is one of the

antecedents to being a profitable organization. In a related study by Mumford (2015), the

research suggested that each team member comes to the task at hand with different input levels,

and collaboration through teamwork is essential to produce positive outcomes for the customers.

Mumford concluded that effective teamwork consists of the sum of the wholes being more

significant than the sum of the parts, thus improving the collaboration of each team member.

Theme 3: Leadership Engagement with Staff

Leadership engagement with employees is crucial to developing more robust engagement

from your employees to their customers. Joplin et al. (2021) suggested that when employees feel

supported and treated equitably by their manager, the organization works more intensely for the

organization. Joplin et al. concluded that this passion makes employees feel safe expressing

themselves and builds a more vigorous engagement with their manager and the organization.

Subtheme 3(a): Lead by Example

As an outcome of the previous theme of leadership engagement by staff, the researcher

discovered the secondary subtheme of leading by example toward your employees. The

researcher identified lead by example as a subtheme of leadership engagement since several

participants mentioned the importance of leading by example. Based on the findings, seven of

twenty-nine participants (25%) stated that the subtheme of leading by example was an essential

step to leadership engagement within the hospitality industry. Cheng and Wong (2015) suggested

that leading by example is commonly known as acting as a proactive role model to your employees, which is considered a social learning theory. According to Cheng and Wong, "People acquire a large part of their behavior by observing and imitating others in a social context, and thus vicariously learn and modify behavior patterns through the psychological process of modeling" (p. 129).

Theme 4: Delivering High-Quality Services

Based on the findings, eight out of twenty-nine participants (28%) mentioned the importance of professionally trained staff delivering high-quality services to customers within the hospitality and tourism industries. Zeqiraj and Nimani (2022) stated that successful hospitality entities do not count solely on their products and services but, more importantly, on how both features are delivered to the customer. The researchers emphasized the need for the service to be provided by quality-oriented staff since the benefits are more significant than the tangible products in the hospitality experience. However, these features contribute to the overall customer experience in the service delivery process.

Subtheme 4(a): Knowing Customers' Needs and Wants

The researcher identified a common subtheme of knowing the customer's needs and wants at the resort facility. This subtheme is one of the foundational building blocks of the marketing management framework and is examined under the theme of delivering high-quality services. Based on the findings, six out of twenty-nine participants (21%) mentioned the subtheme of knowing the needs and wants of your customers. Zeqiraj and Nimani (2022) stated that for hospitality organizations to achieve customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty, the provider needs to anticipate the customers' needs and be able to satisfy those needs with exceptional quality services. Organizations that can understand and meet their customer needs

gain greater profitability than those companies that fail to understand customer needs and, more relevantly, satisfy those needs (Armstrong & Kolter, 2018).

Theme 5: Caring Organizational Culture

The participant's perception of organizational culture seems to be a critical precursor to the overall level of customer loyalty in the hospitality setting. What is considered corporate culture for non-managerial hospitality employees? Pizam (2020) defined hospitality organizational culture as "a system of shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and expectations whose ultimate goal is to provide exceptional service and memorable satisfactory experiences to all the organization's stakeholders" (p. 432). In shaping hospitality organizational culture and promoting a positive workplace, employee interactions with guests are more personal than in any other industry. As a result of these personal interactions with the customers, employee attitudes positively affect the guests' services (Russen et al., 2023).

Summary of Literature Review Outline

This comprehensive literature review focused on the critical concepts outlined in this study's previous conceptual framework section. Over the past two decades, many research studies have focused on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and competitive advantage in tourism and hospitality management. However, there need to be more current studies on the interaction of leadership behaviors and employee engagement, resulting in the outcomes of customer loyalty leading to sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, the researcher reviewed numerous scholarly articles on leadership styles and employee engagement levels to deliver high-performance and quality services.

In addition, the literature review offered current articles on the employee-customer concept as more service industry organizations understand the need for effective

communications to maintain the motivation and satisfaction of engaged employees (Zhang & Geng, 2020). Additionally, peer-reviewed literature studies were added to this section as part of the complete compilation of literature review research, with some articles based on the research findings. These scholarly articles were used as a benchmark for the totality of findings within this study. Furthermore, the researcher further discussed discovered themes after completing the third research section of this paper.

Summary of Section 1 and Transition

The objective of this section was to provide the infrastructure of this marketing study, including but not limited to identifying the specific problem, constructs, theories, nature of the study, and participants. In addition, the case study design allowed the researcher to understand the problem statement and develop informative, open-ended research questions for qualitative analysis. The literature review section analyzed the comprehensive review of current academic articles to gather pertinent background information on the constructs and provided clarity and direction. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations were carefully reviewed, adding credibility and validity to this study. In addition, the implications of biblical integration and its relationship to the marketing field of study contributed to the context of the research framework. Based on the information gathered in Section 1 – the researcher has confidence that the foundational elements of the study have been circumspectly considered, and the researcher was academically prepared to proceed to Section 2 – The Research Project.

Section 2: The Project

This qualitative research study explored the interactions and relationship between leadership behaviors and customer satisfaction, leading to loyalty and sustainable competitive advantage. This section outlined how the researcher conducted the research within the scope of the problem statement and purpose statement. In addition, this proposal section explained the appropriateness of the method and design applied to this dissertation study. Furthermore, the research method and design also discussed the principle of bracketing to avoid the researcher's personal biases and triangulation approaches.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this single case study's flexible (qualitative) design aimed to understand how customer loyalty in most service industry businesses related to their performance and profitability outcomes of competitive advantage within their markets. The research explored how service organizations gain a competitive advantage by building on the pathways from customer satisfaction to customer loyalty. The net gain for these service organizations was to reinforce this sustained loyalty to position the organization for sustainable competitive advantage. Davis and Nag (2020) asserted that sustainable competitive advantage is based on the durability of the difference and the capability gap between an organization and its competitors. Competitive advantages can be sustained when operational efficiencies, leadership support, and performance effectiveness align with the organization's strategy (Gonzalez-Torres et al., 2022).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher was to formulate the most viable research method and design, collect the data within the scope of the purpose statement, and report the results unbiasedly. The first role of the researcher in this flexible research process is to choose a specific problem to be

extensively studied (Yin, 2018). The researcher focused on a marketing-specific problem that addressed the customer loyalty pathway from the role of leadership behaviors to the outcome of sustainable competitive advantage within the hospitality service industry. In this study, the researcher recognized how customer satisfaction can be synthesized into long-term loyalty and trusted commitment to improving a service company's positioning in a competitive market.

The researcher's second role was an investigative process to develop a practicable purpose statement and formulate insightful research questions. The researcher framed several of these research questions illustrated in Section 1. Another critical role of the researcher was to select an appropriate research design and methodology to affirm the assumptions based on the paradigm (Trigueros-Cervantes et al., 2018). Upon completing these processes, the researcher identified qualified participants for the study. For this dissertation study, the researcher interviewed frontline hospitality managers and service employees within the South Florida market. The role of the researcher was to use the one-on-one interview method to gain insights with the participants. In this role, the researcher must understand the need for a bilateral level of trust between the participants and researcher, the privacy of the collected data, and the consolidation of problem-specific findings (Trigueros-Cervantes et al., 2018).

The final role of the researcher was to produce an unbiased report of the findings. Maher et al. (2018) suggested that qualitative analysis needs to contextualize the research results, therefore being able to visualize the range of data from the study. The focus of the final report varies based on the audience, such as in a scientific or academic nature observation (Trigueros-Cervantes et al., 2018). The researcher utilized the MAXQDA software platform to analyze the data through coding techniques and identifying common themes. Furthermore, the inductive data analysis determined five themes two sub-themes, and built on previously mentioned theories in

section 1 (Trigueros-Cervantes et al., 2018). Maher et al. contended that data rigor belongs to the qualitative analysis process, leading to the trustworthiness of the findings.

Summary of the Role of the Researcher

In summary, the researcher's role involved many well-prepared functions and responsibilities. Trigueros-Cervantes et al. (2018) explained that the role of the researcher was a four-step multi-task process, all of which were described in the above section. The researcher decided to study the pathways of competitive advantage in the hospitality service industries, though the researcher had never worked in this service-related business. This decision aimed to avoid the perception of or the inclusion of industry knowledge and practices that could lean toward work biases. Therefore, the researcher decided to prevent the perception of such a prejudicial observation. As this study progressed, the researcher understood the need for consistency of the task processes and delineating data findings into an unbiased final report. The researcher followed the proper steps to ensure that the research was precise and accurate and that the results were trustworthy (Synder, 2019).

Researcher Methodology

The researcher chose the qualitative, flexible methodology to analyze the relative constructs and theories of how the functions of behavioral leadership and customer loyalty lead to the sustainability of competitive advantage. Snyder (2019) contented that qualitative research was one of the best methods to develop a systematic review process of the actual research findings of the qualitative study and compare them to the current literature review articles. This qualitative single case study's commitment was to examine the collected research data findings, analyze common themes, and present the results from an impartial observation. Roger et al. (2018) stated that qualitative research is unique from a quantitative method since there seems to

be more of a connection between the researcher and the researched, and the results are principally transparent.

Discussion of Research Design

This study was conducted with a flexible design using qualitative methods; specifically, a single case study design was used. The researcher needed to choose the appropriate method and design to ensure the results' validity and the study's integrity (Kohler et al., 2022). The researcher used the single case study design to explore how service organizations gain a competitive advantage by building on the linear pathway from customer satisfaction to customer loyalty. Arslan (2020) contended that service organizations build long-term customer loyalty to position the organization for sustainable competitive advantage. Priya's (2021) study found the following:

> Case studies are a qualitative design in which the researcher explores a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in depth. The case(s) are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period (p. 95).

The case study method encompasses the study of a case within the context of real-life experiences or bounded systems (Yin, 2018). In-depth data collection techniques, such as focus groups and one-on-one interviews, are needed in case studies over a given timeline. According to Denney and Weckesser (2022), "Both interviews and focus groups tend to be flexible and non-standardized, with greater interest in the participants' perspectives and experience than for quantitative research" (p. 1). Within the marketing application context, case studies are helpful tools to formulate new strategies and understand customer behavioral influences.

Discussion of Research Methods

For this qualitative study, the researcher chose the flexible qualitative study to understand how customer loyalty was related to performance and profitability compared to their competitive advantage position in their respective markets. According to Denney and Wackesser (2022), qualitative research guides the researcher to keep collecting data until a point of saturation is reached, though there is no limit on sample size. In reality, qualitative research typically involves using a smaller sample size until the researcher finds the collection of emerging concepts (Denney & Wackesser, 2022). The qualitative methodology allowed for flexibility and adaptiveness, acknowledging the researcher to attain the fit for the sample size (Kohler et al., 2022).

The researcher's decision to choose qualitative research permitted the flexibility to understand the problem statement, apply the pertinent research questions, and solidify the design method selected. Kohler et al. (2018) suggested that researchers need to be aware of not acting as an interpreter for the participants. Instead, the researcher needs to collect data in an unbiased manner. The researcher understood the need to ask open-ended questions and allowed the participants to offer their hospitality industry experiences to this study. Qualitative researchers can bring the human perspective to understand the studied phenomenon (Kohler et al., 2018). Furthermore, Roger et al. (2018) contended that qualitative researchers must understand knowledge gaps and assumptions surrounding researchers and participants in our daily lives.

Research Triangulation

Triangulation is a research tool used to ensure the collected findings are robust, comprehensive, and well-developed while validating the data and credibility of the research findings. Triangulation refers to multiple methods leading to the same results, which gives credence and unbiased reliability to the research findings of the phenomenon (Noble & Heale,

2019). According to Moon (2019), methodological triangulation can be used by one type or in combination with several methods. The researcher used the data triangulation method to capture qualitative data from different subjects at varying times and settings. In addition to data triangulation, the researcher utilized methodological triangulation since the researcher plans to use various data collection instruments, such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus group findings, commonly used in case study research. Interpreting possible divergence and convergence data point results was found to be essential, and methodological triangulation was instrumental in the evaluation process. Furthermore, triangulation is considered confirmatory and contributes to demonstrating the reliability and validity of the study (Moon, 2019).

Summary of Research Method and Design

In summary, the researcher chose the qualitative, single-case study method because it was deemed appropriate to guide the research data collection process on the topics(s) of the study. However, it was crucial to maintain semi-structured questions that elicited answers that needed to be leading questions for the participants (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). For example, the researcher framed several research questions to analyze insightful data on hospitality leadership engagement with frontline managers and staff. In addition, the researcher needed to understand if leadership behaviors impact frontline hospitality staff personnel and their perception of the meaning of customer satisfaction. Abutabenjeh and Jaradat (2018) shared the importance of selecting the proper method design for the research project since substantive differences can be seen in each stage of the research process. Furthermore, the researcher's choice of qualitative methodology and case study design provided findings that helped to supplement the research gap(s) of both customer satisfaction and consumer loyalty and their impact on competitive advantage.

Participants, Population, and Sampling

Participants

The participants for this flexible research study included hospitality frontline managers, assistant managers, and frontline staff workers with direct face-to-face customer interaction who work in the Forbes 5-star resort located in the South Florida market area hospitality industry. According to Gill (2020), qualitative research involved participants who can answer questions on the phenomenon being studied. In another related study, Diacic et al. (2018) suggested that hospitality businesses must continually develop a network of partners, such as suppliers, tour agents, vendors, and facility guests. In addition, these service firms must also include their frontline employees and managers in their foundational, long-term partnership network. The participation of the hospitality industry employees was critical as they set the tenor for their guests' experiences since these groups of individuals had the most direct interaction with the customers. These interactions were viewed as positive or negative experiences from the employees' perspective.

According to Choi et al. (2022), "frontline employees are emotionally well prepared for difficult or uncivil customers within a shorter time because of their previous experiences. In contrast, at the subconscious level, employees might perceive stress from previous or repeated exposure to customer incivility" (p. 177). When hospitality employees feel empowered to deal directly with customers' needs, wants, and complaints, they develop a sense of responsibility toward them (Afsar et al., 2018). This research study focused on identifying participants who can relate to the issues expressed through the research questions.

The researcher developed the following fundamental qualification criteria for the target participants: 1) each participant must be at least 18 years old, 2) the research study include both

male and female participants, and 3) each participant must have had at least one year of direct, hands-on customer experience with the organization. The researcher identified and selected 29 qualified participants (n=29) for this research study based on these criteria. In addition, the researcher decided on a combination of management-level and frontline staff employee participants, nineteen non-managerial level employees (65%) and ten managerial/leadership level employees (35%). Such delineation allowed the researcher to look for thematic variances between different positional ranks in the organization. Organizational leadership sets both the vision and culture for the company and cultivates the attitudes of managers and frontline staff within the company (Ko & Kang, 2019). Hospitality leadership played a critical role in the review process of the participants since the researcher needed support identifying qualified participants for the study.

Population and Sampling

This qualitative research study focused on each developmental pathway, from leadership behaviors toward employees' perceptions and practice of customer satisfaction outcomes in the hospitality industry to satisfying customer expectations and establishing long-term loyalty. One of the research questions studied was the relationship between leadership behaviors and frontline employees. The researcher needed to identify a population and sample size focusing on these criteria, such as frontline hospitality managers and staff-level employees within the South Florida market area. The section examined the researcher's selected actions to ensure that a proper population of study subjects was identified and that the sample size met the saturation point on the given research questions.

Discussion of Population

Zikmund et al. (2013) defined a population as an entire group with various common characteristics of interest to the researcher. For example, the researcher described the population as all South Florida hospitality industry workers. The researcher has explained the essential qualification criteria for the subset sample group, the target participants: 1) each participant must be at least 18 years old, 2) the research study included both male and female participants, and 3) each participant did have at least one year of direct, hands-on customer experience with the organization. Therefore, hospitality employees who did not meet these qualifications did not participate in this research study. The eligible population of hospitality working in South Florida marketing could reach hundreds of thousands of workers, including several South Florida-based cruise line companies. According to Hernandez (2022), Florida has approximately one million people working in the hospitality industry. The researcher needed to gain experience insights into managers and employees and establish a target population of 35% management-level employees and 65% frontline staff-level employees.

To reach a saturation rate, the researcher estimated a sample size of fifteen to twenty hospitality participants for this marketing research study. More specifically, this sample size projection would equate to selecting approximately five management-level and fifteen staff-level participants for this research project. The optimal sample size differs depending on the chosen resource literature. For example, Boddy (2016) suggested from research by Marshall (2013) to consider a sample size of 15-20 interviews for case studies. Boddy concludes, "In constructivist or in-depth qualitative research, a single example can be highly instructive" (p. 431). Selecting a sub-population of experienced hospitality workers and managers offered first-hand experiences of the phenomena. Frontline managers in this study provided experiential perspectives on the

research question topics. Furthermore, the saturation point was reached at the 11th participants in this study.

Discussion of Sampling

In qualitative research, the sampling process is defined as tenaciously informing an understanding of the research questions and subsequent phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A sample is considered a subset of a larger population. According to Zikmund et al. (2013), " the purpose of sampling is to estimate an unknown characteristic of a population" (p. 385). Furthermore, a sample can be considered a group of people (or events) from a population participating in the research study.

One of the more essential determinant steps in this qualitative research was selecting the sampling size. For researchers, determining sample size has often been a contentious and vague issue in qualitative research (Mthuli et al., 2022). For example, Mthuli et al. contended that beyond the point of saturation, "there are various other factors that influence sample size including the researcher's knowledge in the area of inquiry (Jette et al., 2003), their experience, the researcher's subjective judgment, and quality of information collected (Sandelowski, 1995) and sampling techniques" (p. 812). Boddy (2016) contended that qualitative research tends to focus on smaller sample sizes; however, researchers must also work within the context and paradigm of the research being studied.

The researcher diligently identified the sample as experienced hospitality employees in the South Florida market. As such, the researcher stipulated the required qualifications for participants of this study as 1) each participant must be at least 18 years old, 2) the research study did include both male and female participants, and 3) each participant had at least one year

of direct, hands-on customer experience with the organization. Therefore, hospitality employees who do not meet these qualifications did not participate in this research study.

Discussion of Sampling Method. There are two principal sampling method categories in research projects: probability and non-probability sampling methods (Berndt, 2020). The probability sampling method involves the random selection of participants, which can consider all participants to have an equal chance of selection. The non-probability method is based on the subjective attention of the researcher rather than random selection (Berndt, 2020). The researcher selected the multi-sampling method under the non-probability approach: purposive and quota sampling. Purposive sampling (also known as judgment sampling) allowed the researcher to select participants who met the chosen research criteria for this study. The quota sampling method enables the researcher to evaluate managerial and non-managerial staff and define these groups into separate categories (Zikmund, 2013). This qualitative study's two types of classes were managerial and non-managerial. For any researcher, choosing a reliable sampling method necessitates several considerations, such as determining the population and size of the participants, the design of the research questions, the chosen methodology, and often, the elements of both time and financial constraints (Berndt, 2020).

Discussion of Sampling Frame. In qualitative research, the researcher must ensure that the sample consistently represents the population (Boddy, 2016). The sample frame (also known as the working population) is a list of research elements that could be chosen from the sample participants (Zikmund, 2013). The sampling frame for this study was the population of the hospitality industry in the South Florida market that meets the following list of elements: 1) each participant must be at least 18 years old, 2) the research study included both male and female participants, and 3) each participant must have at least one year of direct, hands-on customer

experience with the organization. The researcher selected a sampling frame of twenty-nine (29)

participants consisting of managerial-level and frontline staff employees who had at least

one year of face-to-face customer interaction within the organization.

Discussion of Desired Sample and Sample Size. Vasileiou et al. (2018) averred that in

qualitative research, samples tend to be small and purposive to support the case-oriented analysis

relevant to investigating the phenomenon. The desired sample selection for this research project

was South Florida hospitality workers that meet the following list of elements: 1) each

participant must be at least 18 years old, 2) the research study included both male and female

participants, and 3) each participant must have at least one year of direct, hands-on customer

experience with the organization, frontline managers with three years of experience. The

researcher needed to gain experience insights into managers and employees and establish a target

population of 35% management-level employees and 65% frontline staff-level employees.

Sampling size was an essential parameter in evaluating both the quality and

trustworthiness of a qualitative research study (Boddy, 2016). The topic of qualitative sample

size varies between academic researchers. For example, Boddy suggested sampling until data

saturation has been reached is one method of justification. In contrast, Creswell and Creswell

(2018) contended that "For a case study, I would not include more than 4 or 5 case studies in a

single study" (p. 157). Marshall et al. (2013) suggested a sample size of 15 interviews was

appropriate for case studies. Experts agree that qualitative research does not answer the "how

many" question and focuses more on the study's methodology, paradigm, and practical research

issues (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Sampling can be canceled at the point when no new information is

contributing to the value (or data) of the study. There has been much scholarly debate over the

definition of data saturation in qualitative research. It is present in all research and is a relative component of the study's rigor (Guest et al., 2020).

The researcher needed to gain the experience insights of managers and employees and establish a quota sample method of 35% management level employees and 65% frontline staff level employees. The researcher initially estimated a sample size of fifteen to twenty hospitality participants for this marketing research study based on the literature review findings discussed in Section 1. The composition of this target group was estimated to be five management-level employees and ten non-managerial-level frontline employees. The researcher contended that this sample size would represent a generalized population of the hospitality industry. This relatively small sample size did allow the researcher to gain insight into the research questions. It enables more participant entry if saturation is not achieved within the data. The researcher used an iteration process to allow more participants to validate the saturation point. For the sake of this study, the researcher noted in Table #-3 the first fifteen interviews for which the saturation point was reached within run #-2, and no new themes were discovered after four runs between the 16th and 29th interviewees. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the sample number needs to be sufficient to provide an opportunity to identify specific themes of the case. Boddy (2013) suggested that case studies have been undermined over the years regarding their ability to capture theoretical value.

Access to Participants. To gain access to the participants for this research study, the researcher plans to directly contact one major hospitality management company in the South Florida market to solicit participants. The researcher made the initial contact with company leadership, explained the scope and purpose of the project, and requested leadership assistance with access to qualified participants. The company CEO tasked the Senior VP of Human

Resources to work with the researcher on employee access. After approval by the IRB

committee, the researcher initiated this stage of the research process, including approval forms

and interviewing guidelines.

Summary of Participants, Populations, and Sampling

The selection of the sample population and sample size played an integral role in the

success of this qualitative research study. The non-probability method allowed the researcher the

flexibility to use multi-sampling types of quota and purposive methods for data collection.

Initially, the desired sample size was fifteen participants for this research project; however, the

researcher selected to interview twenty-nine participants to ensure the proper saturation point and

strengthen the validity and reliability of this study. Selection criteria were South Florida

hospitality workers that met the following list of elements: 1) each participant had to be at least

18 years old, 2) the research study included both male and female participants, and 3) each

participant had at least one year of direct, hands-on customer experience with the organization.

Frontline managers needed at least one year of direct customer service experience. The

researcher needed to gain the experience insights of managers and employees and establish the

target population of 35% management-level and 65% frontline employees.

Data Collection and Organization

Qualitative researchers have more flexibility regarding the data collection process

(Creswell, 2014). For example, a researcher can collect online information from participants,

perform one-to-one interviews, or conduct observational recordings. The researcher planned to

use focus meetings and one-to-one interviews to organize a sizable amount of reliable data from

twenty-nine (29) qualified management and frontline employees of a hospitality facility in the

South Florida market. Participant qualifications were illustrated in detail in the above section.

Johnson et al. (2010) contended that selecting a software program that integrates data from many platforms is one of the most critical decisions in organizing a practical qualitative research plan. The researcher purchased the MAXQDA platform to transcribe interviews, analyze research findings, and note common themes within the study context. Furthermore, this section reviewed the instrument planning process for this research project and details of the data collection process.

Data Collection Plan

The data collected did support each of the research questions, along with follow-up questions relating to the scope and purpose of this study. The answer to these questions related to how leadership behaviors in a hospitality organization affected the long-term relationship with the frontline service staff and their customers. Zikmund et al. (2018) contended that research questions should be designed to define the project's objective. The research questions were purposely designed for frontline hospitality managers and staff employees in the South Florida market. One of the more crucial steps in the data collection plan was ethical considerations that the researcher needed to contemplate. Furthermore, such a review included respect for the participants' privacy and ensured the researcher did not use deception for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher used semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to elicit first-hand insights into how leaders in hospitality entities work with their employees to ensure they can promote customer loyalty and pursue the organizational goal of sustainable competitive advantage. According to Mahat-Shamir et al. (2021), "In-depth semi-structured interviews elicit narratives that can be highly meaningful, as they turn questions about a given topic into storytelling invitations" (p. 83). The researcher initially contacted a major hospitality entity in

South Florida and secured approval (see Appendix A) to conduct one-to-one interviews with qualified participants. The data was collected from audio recordings of the one-to-one interviews or unrecorded primary data from focus meetings. Findings were edited using MAXQDA qualitative software, which helped assess common coding themes and the point of saturation to the study. Another critical step in the data collection process was to edit the findings to reduce potential errors and check for data consistency (Cooper, 2019).

Member Checking. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that validating the collected data versus verifying data is a more viable process in qualitative research, especially using the case study method. Considering this validation process as an integral part of qualitative research, the researcher initially intended to have the participants' interviews transcribed by a third party to avoid any potential biases or misunderstandings of findings. However, the researcher used Word Voice Dictate, which provided voice-to-text transcription capabilities. Korstjens and Moser (2018) contended that trustworthiness and credibility are two pillars of validation for qualitative research. The researcher sent each study participant a copy of their transcripts to ensure the accuracy of their insights and a means to conduct formal data analysis to verify incomplete data. Furthermore, this step served as a review process by each participant to validate the data and offered another check-and-review to decrease the researcher's potential for biases.

Follow-Up Interviews. The researcher carefully reviewed each interview transcript to ensure the completeness of each question. If a new question arose from a direct response to the initial interview session, the researcher had a secondary plan to contact the interviewee for clarification. No such situation occurred during this study, and no further clarification was needed outside of reviewing the interviewee's transcripts. As mentioned in the previous section, participants reviewed their interview transcripts for accuracy and corrections.

Instruments

This qualitative research study used the personal, face-to-face interview method, which involved several follow-up questions when needed, to elicit more data from more participants to reach the saturation point. Creswell (2014) emphasized that face-to-face interviews offer more of an interpersonal relationship between the interviewer and participant; however, the interviewer keeps the conversation aligned on the topics of the study. According to Robson and McCartan (2016), "Face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying one's line of inquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives in a way that postal and other self-administered questionnaires cannot" (p. 286). Researchers use personal interviews since this method is often considered conversational, and the researcher can begin to understand the interviewee's experiences (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021).

Interview Guides. The researcher utilized the semi-structured interview approach and topic-specific open-ended questions. The objective of semi-structured interviews was to allow more freedom and time to present the questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The interview guide had eight well-structured, open-ended questions (see Appendix D). The purpose of the interview guide was to maintain consistency with the questions and focus during the interview process. Furthermore, the interview guide allowed the interviewer to ask more follow-up questions to clarify the interviewee's responses.

The researcher formulated specific questions to collect insightful information that ultimately captured and analyzed the data outcomes on customer satisfaction, consumer loyalty, and its impact on the competitive advantage of hospitality organizations in the southern United States.

RQ 1.   What steps can South Florida hospitality industry leaders take with their employees to help promote customer loyalty?

RQ 1a. What negative actions or behaviors do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that fail to promote customer loyalty?

RQ 1b. What positive actions do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that promote customer loyalty?

Research Questions 1-1b. These qualitative questions generated valuable information on developing critical customer loyalty perspectives in the service industries. The dual emphasis of these questions served on how leaders and frontline service employees viewed the essential steps needed to maintain customer loyalty and determine the common elements that help promote competitive advantage. Perceived service quality is an important strategic development consideration for service firms, given the increase in consumer purchase power and competition in the customer market (Koo et al., 2020). The purpose of this study was to indicate how strong customer loyalty could develop when service providers create solid and lasting emotional bonds with their customers. Customer loyalty is critical for long-term profitability, success, and competitive advantage. Both trust and commitment are the key drivers to sustained loyalty, which translates to the development of service differentiation and competitive advantage (Ramanathan et al., 2017).

RQ 2.   What do employees need to know or learn from leadership to promote customer loyalty?

RQ 2a.   How important is hospitality leadership to promote and demonstrate superior customer loyalty in their daily actions and words to their service staff?

RQ 2b. What are the essential business characteristics that identify an effective hospitality leader?

Research Questions 2-2b. These open-ended qualitative questions helped to identify research data on critical elements of the impact of customer loyalty, such as trust and commitment to repurchasing products or services that contributed to maintaining a competitive advantage in the marketplace. The overarching value of these research questions addressed the success elements that contributed to customer satisfaction and subsequent customer loyalty. Loyalty leads to consumers' wishes to purchase the same brand and commitment (Arslan et al., 2020). The most salient definition of customer loyalty refers to the purchasing tendency of current customers to become repeat customers based on their past experiences and future expectations. Conversely, customer disloyalty outcomes demonstrate fidelity to purchasing other similar competitive brands, resulting in the customer experiencing little to no post-purchase dissonance (Koo et al., 2020).

RQ 3   How important is it for service industry employees and leaders to understand the meaning of competitive advantage?

RQ 3a.   What are the most important advantages a hospitality company can practice to achieve competitive advantage?

Research Questions 3-3a. These exploratory questions were designed to generate comparative research data and helped to posit the importance of customer satisfaction in service-related industries through the eyes of frontline managers in the South Florida market. Researchers must understand how customer satisfaction can be transformed into long-term loyalty in a constructive process to improve competitive positioning in the market. Another key driver for these research questions explored how a service leader can differentiate their

management styles between immediate satisfaction versus long-term loyalty and commitment.

Davis and Nag (2020) suggested that determining the importance of customer loyalty helps

service firms evaluate their competitive advantage and future advertising campaigns.

Data Organization Plan

In qualitative research, one of the most constructive steps in the research process is the

proper organization of data, along with the transcribing, coding, analyzing, and storing data to

facilitate the attentive work of data analysis and report writing (Johnson et al., 2010). The

researcher identified a world-class 5-star hospitality company in the South Florida market known

for its exceptional quality of services to customers. Upon IRB approval, the researcher contacted

senior leadership to request interviews with frontline managers and staff employees (see

Appendix A). Senior management facilitated access to 29 qualified participants for the study.

The researcher met with these individuals to explain the scope and purpose of the study (see

Appendix B). The researcher used Microsoft Excel to generate a workable spreadsheet to keep

track of each participant's activity, along with the assignment of a unique identification number

(pseudonym) to maintain the privacy of personal information. According to Creswell and Poth

(2018), "more attention will likely be given to how qualitative data are organized and stored" (p.

175).

Before the interview, the researcher provided each participant with a consent form, which

outlined several common questions of participants (see Appendix C). Each participant read the

consent form carefully, was able to ask the researcher any questions, and had the time to decide

on their voluntary participation before signing the standard consent form (see Appendix C). In

addition, each participant was given a signed copy of the consent form, fully executed by the

participant and researcher. Each interview was conducted using a handheld audio recorder (or

laptop Word Dictate) and transferred to MAXQDA for transcription and coding, along with documentation of time and location noted in their Microsoft Excel file. As previously stated, all collected interview information will be held in a password-protected secure file to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of this sensitive information. All files and information will be kept for three years under password protection. Robson and McCartan (2016) contend that the researchers must respect privacy and anonymity to gain the participants' confidence. Furthermore, the researcher sent each participant a copy of their transcribed interview for review and corrections.

Summary of Data Collection and Organization

In summary, this section detailed the researcher's intended data collection process using semi-structured interview questions, allowing the researcher more flexibility in the interview process to expand into follow-up questions for clarification – if needed. The data collection process needs to be well-organized and provide availability of data for analysis and storing of information (Johnson et al., 2010). The data organization plan outlines the importance of the planning, organizing, collection, coding, and storing of data in a password-protected file for three years. The researcher acknowledges the ethical standards involved with collecting and storing data to ensure the confidentiality of data and the prevention of any breach of collected data. The researcher used the MAXQDA software transcription and coding platform to conduct data analysis and prepare the final report.

Data Analysis

In this section, the researcher provided a thorough review of the data analysis process of this study, including the use of coding and themes. Qualitative data analysis involves the detailed preparation, collection, and analysis of data to provide some level of explanation (or

interpretation) through patterns and themes (Cooper, 2019). Data analysis was a multi-step process involving coding for themes, reading emergent ideas, a focused understanding of the data using visualization of data, and the implementation of triangulation. In addition, data integrity plays an integral role in ensuring the collected data has been carefully edited and properly coded so the outcomes can help the researcher prepare the final report (Zikmund et al., 2018). One of the more challenging phases in qualitative research is sorting through the volume of collected data without compromising data integrity.

Emergent Ideas

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that when reviewing digital representations, such as audiovisual materials, it's incumbent for the researcher to write short emergent ideas to synthesize into the data analysis. One of the more effective methods is memoing these experiences for later use by creating codes and theme development. In qualitative research, data can be captured during the investigative stage, such as during the interview and data analysis processes, through field notes and memoing. Yin (2018) stated that memoing and diagramming should be part of the researcher's fieldwork that can help support later coding by reviewing hints and clues on interpreting pieces of your collected data. Creswell and Poth suggested that researchers begin memoing at the early start of data collection and continue throughout the study, thus prioritizing memoing throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Coding Themes

According to Robson and McCartan (2016), "coding has a central role in qualitative analysis" (p. 467). The researcher's first step was to use open coding, sometimes called first-level coding, to select and code the data for the major categories of the study. From this coding

method, axial coding emerged after identifying one core phenomenon and building categories around this core phenomenon. The final step was selective coding, whereby the researcher develops a proposition that interrelates into the categories of a story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Robson and McCartan suggested that second-level coding is the process of coding groups of initially identified codes into smaller groups of themes. Zikmund et al. (2018) indicated that themes might help discover the description of the same terms or groups of words in a qualitative research study. Furthermore, Snodgrass et al. (2020) contended that themes can be viewed as a textual analysis used by qualitative researchers to identify repeated examples of speech or other forms of communication. The researcher used MAXQDA qualitative research software to properly code and identify those familiar with the proposition of this study.

Interpretations

The interpretation process of qualitative research involves engaging in the meaningful interpretation of the data or simply making sense of the data. The interpretation stage involves conceptualizing beyond the codes and themes into a more definitive meaning of the study data (Creswell, 2014). There are contrary distinctions between the data analysis and the interpretations of the data. Zikmund et al. (2018) contend that the interpretation of the data is akin to synthesizing inferences from the data analysis findings. The researcher needs to begin to pull the big picture together to look for common themes in conjunction with the consistency of the data. Zikmund et al. suggested that researchers need to look at the interpretation of qualitative data from a management perspective. According to Zikmund et al. (2018), "the qualitative meaning of the data and their managerial implications are an important aspect of the interpretation" (p. 500). Furthermore, the researcher plans to review previous literature reviews when interpreting the data from this qualitative case study.

Data Representation

In the final stage of the research analysis process, the researcher must be able to create a visual image of the data (Creswell, 2014). This visualization process helps the researcher identify more clarity in the data and select common themes. Once the data has been analyzed, the researcher can construct a visual picture using tables, graphs, matrices, and other illustration material to give the study a more meaningful visual context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This information helps the researcher to develop natural generalizations, apply the generalizations that people can learn from the study data, and use the learning process of the case study to a practical experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis for Triangulation

Quantitative data analysis looks more at the numeric data from a study, whereas qualitative data analysis is more subjective and based more on properties, attributes, and labels (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Triangulation refers to multiple methods leading to the same results, which gives credence and unbiased reliability to the research findings of the phenomenon (Noble & Heale, 2019). Creswell and Poth (2018) further support this definition that researchers must use various resources and methods to collaborate the findings within the data analysis. The researcher used the data triangulation method to capture qualitative data from different subjects at varying times and settings.

In addition to data triangulation, the researcher utilized methodological triangulation since the researcher planned to use various data collection instruments, such as interviews and potential focus group findings, commonly used in case study research. Renz et al. (2018) affirmed that methodological triangulation can increase confidence in the captured research data, build a more robust analysis, and find other data points that could be missed in a single method.

As part of the triangulation process, the researcher utilized the MAXQDA data analysis software to assist in the data analysis and give a more visual representation of the findings. Interpreting possible divergence and convergence data point results was essential, and methodological triangulation was instrumental in the evaluation process.

Summary of Data Analysis

Analyzing and interpreting research data can often be challenging for the qualitative researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this data analysis section, the researcher discussed emergent ideas and the critical need for memoing to synthesize the data analysis process. It is vital to capture as much information as possible during the analysis stage, mainly since memoing the experiences can be used later in the coding process. The following steps were coding and analysis for common themes analyzed in the data. Themes are the common repetition of words used by participants during multiple interviews (Creswell, 2014). The researcher employed the need for triangulation, employing data and methodological triangulation processes for this study. According to Moon et al. (2019), triangulation is one of the most reliable qualitative tools to ensure the use of various data collection methods. It helps to synthesize the study's data, analysis, and conclusion into a more accurate finding. The researcher used MAXQDA qualitative software to analyze the data and use coding to identify common themes among the data set earlier in the section.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are essential criteria for evaluating research data measurements. These two criteria are closely related, but they both have different meanings. Consistency in the research data is crucial to understanding reliability, as validity measures correctness (Zikmund, 2018). In the research process, the researcher followed ethical considerations throughout the data

collection process and for reliable interpretation of the findings (Creswell, 2014). The study's mission of validity and reliability was to help minimize the potential for errors and biases in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The validity and reliability evaluation criteria were avoided in earlier qualitative research, using titles such as credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. However, more recent research authors support the relevance of both criteria in qualitative, flexible-designed research, usually under the perspective of trustworthiness (Robson & McCartan, 2018).

Reliability

In qualitative research, reliability is compulsory to ensure that all steps in the research process follow ethical protocol and substantiate reliable outcomes. Research methods lacking reliability are often not considered to provide a truthful perspective of the topic of study (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). The researcher designed and conducted an open-ended interview format, adhering to the terms of the interview guide, using field notes for interviewing memoing, and using the MAXQDA qualitative software program to transcribe all audio interviews of participants. Reliability was considered a component of trustworthiness since research studies considered more trustworthy are de facto, more likely to be more credible in their findings, and have more impact on the research objective (Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Several of the best-known criteria of trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Qualitative studies require the researcher to formulate trustworthiness strategies that build the confidence that needs to be established in the truth of the data findings. Some strategies that safeguard credibility are triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checks (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher used both triangulation in data collection and member checks for each participant to

review their post-interview transcripts for accuracy. According to Singh et al. (2021), transferability is challenging for qualitative studies when applying the degree of similar findings from one context to another with other participants. The researcher ensured transferability by confirming that all processes in the qualitative research are well-documented with thick descriptions, leading to credible outcomes and trustworthy findings. Another strategic consideration for qualitative researchers is the dependability of the results, which includes the degree of data consistency and study outcomes (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

In qualitative research, dependability is data stability over time and can be repeated (Singh et al., 2021). An audit trail is a more common evaluation tool for qualitative researchers. Rose and Johnson (2020) defined an audit trail as "documentation that provides support for the techniques undertaken throughout the research process" (p. 444). The researcher ensured dependability via an audit trail throughout the study, from data collection and analysis of the data to the formulation of the outcome findings. Furthermore, the last criterion of trustworthiness to consider in qualitative research is confirmability, which has a focal point on neutrality. Singh et al. suggest that researchers can use a reflexive analysis to verify confirmability. A reflexive analysis is being aware of one own bias and using good judgment on the influences of the research outcomes. The researcher plans to be neutral to this process, not influenced by biases and employing non-judgmental interpretations.

Validity

In qualitative research, the researcher must understand and maintain the accuracy of the tools, data, and study findings. For example, a reliable but invalid research instrument may yield inaccurate results (Zikmund et al., 2018). Research validity determines the accuracy of the study findings from the viewpoint of the researcher, participants, and the final consumers of the

research outcome (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Within the context of validity and its purpose to reduce the threat of invalid findings, researchers use several evaluative tools, such as bracketing, triangulation, and the point of data saturation. First, bracketing is the concept that emphasizes that the researcher needs to set aside any personal biases based on previous experiences and conduct the study from a fresh perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Next, what is the role of triangulation in qualitative research? Triangulation uses multiple sources and methods to provide collaborative findings. According to Creswell (2014), "When qualitative researchers locate evidence to document a code or theme in different sources of data, they are triangulating information and providing validity to their findings" (p. 251). The researcher used two concepts of triangulation, both data and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation concentrates more on obtaining data from multiple sources within a defined collection of data methods (Moon, 2019). In addition to data triangulation, the researcher did utilize methodological triangulation since the researcher used various data collection instruments such as one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, and focus group findings, commonly used in case study research.

Another validation strategy employed by the researcher was the issue of data saturation. In qualitative research, data saturation is defined as estimating, rigor, and adequacy of the sample size (Guest et al., 2020). Determining the saturation point is often challenging for even the experienced researcher. Based on the literature review and the need for validity application to this dissertation paper, the researcher adopted a new thematic saturation 'yardstick' called the Base Line, Run Length, and New Information Threshold. Guest et al. suggested that this concept considers the context of inductive thematic analysis. The researcher supported the idea of a simple yet relatively measurable method to determine the saturation point to maximize the

validity and reliability of this study. Furthermore, this threshold concept did provide a percent

saturation for each data run to generate the 95th percentile for the degree of saturation.

Member Checking. The researcher shared and validated with each participant a copy of

their transcripts before the start of the research analysis process. Iivari (2018) stated the

importance of the participants reviewing their comments and making appropriate changes, if

necessary. Iivari contended that member-checking increases the research project's validity and

creditability. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that the untainted intentions of participants do

not validate the trustworthiness of your findings.

Follow-Up Interviews. To further validate the research participant's findings, it may be

crucial to perform follow-up interviews to establish clarity and understanding of the given data.

Creswell and Poth (2018) state that the researcher must understand each participant's knowledge

level and how to interact in such a situation. Follow-up interviews can provide the researcher

with an opportunity to clarify a question and to gain a sense of validity within the purpose and

scope of the study. The researcher planned to utilize follow-up interviews with participants, if

necessary.

Bracketing

Bracketing (also known as epoche) is defined as the need for researchers to set aside any

prior experiences or biases and look at the study from a new perspective to gain an objective

view ting aside any previous experiences or preferences and look at the study from a unique

perspective to achieve an objective view (Creswell and Poth, 2018). According to Creswell

(2014), the researcher should look at suspending our understanding in a reflexive position that

fosters a sense of curiosity. For example, the researcher identified three anticipated themes based

on the literature review process. However, the researcher never worked in hospitality-related

business; therefore, these anticipated themes were based on a consumer-centric perspective. The decision to research an industry with no personal first-hand experience was aimed at avoiding the perception of or the inclusion of industry knowledge and practices that could lean toward work biases. Therefore, the researcher decided to prevent the perception of such a prejudicial observation by using the bracketing concept. As this study progressed, the researcher understood the need for consistency of the task processes and delineating data findings into an unbiased final report.

Summary of Bracketing and Validity

In qualitative research, there are numerous steps needed by even the most experienced researcher to ensure the validity and reliability of a research project. The researcher provided an excellent collection and analysis of the data and adequately reported the outcome findings in an unbiased, consumer-friendly report. Along the way, the researcher employs a triangulation strategy to interpret any inconsistencies in the study. Triangulation helped to identify different research sources and collaborate evidence on a theme or new perspective (Creswell, 2014). Furthermore, the researcher explained his intention to use a new saturation concept called the Base Line, Run Length, and New Information Threshold to gain a more substantiated value of the saturation point to the study.

Summary of Section 2 and Transition

The summary of this section provides the building blocks of this single case qualitative research study, including but not limited to the research methodology and design, the profile of the qualified participant, relevant population samples, and the importance of validity and reliability of the research data. The researcher designed semi-structured questions on leadership behaviors to sustain customer satisfaction, maintain loyalty within your customer base, and the

crucial characteristics of sustainable competitive advantage in the South Florida hospitality industry. The significance of this section was to provide a deep understanding of how leadership behaviors interact with frontline employees and subsequently develop customer loyalty. Data findings were well-defined in this study regarding their reliability and validity to ensure the research results are rigorous and trustworthy. Based on the diligent information gathered in Section 2 – the researcher had a high degree of confidence that the foundational methodology of the study had been thoughtfully considered, and the researcher was scholastically prepared to transition to Section 3 – Application of Professional Practice.

Section 3: Application of Professional Practice

Overview of the Study

The primary data source of the case study findings was problem-specific semi-structured questions conducted via in-person interviews with (29) experienced hospitality employees at a luxury, highly reputable Forbes five-star resort property in the South Florida market. Each of the 29 participants was an active, full-time employee who met the study's qualifications. Initially, 30 participants were identified to participate in the study; one employee had a last-minute emergency and could not participate. The basic qualifications for partaking in this study were a minimum age requirement of 18 years old and full-time employment at the resort for at least one year with direct customer contact as part of their job duties. Based on data collected on participant demographics, 35% were at the managerial/leadership level, with 65% at non-managerial positions, 31% male, and 69% females, and the average number of years of employment at the resort was 5.5 years. The researcher conducted all interviews using eight semi-structured questions pertinent to the scope of the research questions and problem statement

(Table 4). Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, though managerial-level participants were asked two additional questions, staying 10-15 minutes of extra time.

These confidential interviews were transcribed using Word Dictate and imported into the MAXQDA software platform for further inductive coding and analysis of newly discovered themes. MAXQDA software and the researcher's laptop computer served as a dual password protection mechanism to ensure the secure storage of all participants' shared and personal information (Oswald, 2019). Proper qualitative data coding helped the researcher make the discovered findings of themes more rigorous and systematic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on research findings, the researcher discovered five new relative themes and two new subthemes and confirmed the three anticipated themes within the research context. This qualitative case study found the five new critical themes of 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) developing and maintaining a caring organizational culture. The two subthemes were identified as 1) leading by example and 2) knowing customers' needs and wants. Furthermore, the three anticipated themes noted in the literature review and applied to this case study were 1) leadership communications, 2) maintaining customer satisfaction, and 3) sustaining employee engagement.

As noted in Section 1, the specific problem that was addressed was the potential inability of South Florida service industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage. Through this case study, the researcher discovered that hospitality leadership needs to ensure employees are engaged with their jobs; such actions helped reduce employee turnover and develop a strong culture of employer-employee commitment. In summary, the researcher developed a newly proposed pathway (Figure 5) that can assist

hospitality managers in improving leadership-employee relationships, aiming to improve customer loyalty and gain sustainable competitive advantage.

Presentation of the Findings

This section reviews the overall presentation of the case study research findings, with a critical synthesis of the qualitative data extrapolated from the study participants' input specific to the research questions and problem statement. The researcher addressed the purpose of the research study by redesigning a practical pathway to customer loyalty, built on the overarching collection of primary research data and further supported by scholarly studies from the literature review. Every participant in the study met the minimum age qualifications of 18+ years old and a minimum of one year of one-to-one direct customer hospitality experience. Twenty-nine professionally diversified participants (n=29) were interviewed in person during this study. They were asked eight semi-structured questions about their experiences while working at the resort or previous hospitality experiences.

The job classification of these team members ranged from front desk services, banquet, spa services, and restaurant staff members. In addition, the researcher interviewed ten frontline management-level team members and asked the same eight questions. Job classification was identified: approximately 35% of participants were recognized at the managerial level (with one of the ten participants in a leadership position), and 65% were classified as non-managerial employees. Furthermore, the gender demographics for the study were nine male (31%) and twenty female (69%) participants.

Introduction

The qualitative concept of bracketing used in data collection enabled the researcher to develop an increase of objectivity about the participants. It did not impede the research questions'

perception of the study's objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used his interview

notes (memoing) to reflect on them in this study's iteration data analysis process. After the

interview, each participant was assigned a unique identification code for security and

confidentiality purposes. As discussed in Section 2, only the researcher retains secure access to

this information. When discussing each participant's experiences throughout this section of the

study, the researcher simplified this coding system using P 1-29 for reference in this section.

Table 1 lists the breakdown of the participants' information and qualifications:

Table 1

Participant Information

Participants	Gender	Yrs. Experience	Role
P 1	F`	2+	Managerial
P 2	F	2	Non-Managerial
P 3	F	1+	Non-Managerial
P 4	F	2+	Non-Managerial
P 5	F	12	Managerial
P 6	M	2+	Non-Managerial
P 7	F	13	Managerial
P 8	F	2+	Non-Managerial
P 9	M	1+	Non-Managerial
P 10	F	6	Managerial
P 11	F	2+	Non-Managerial
P 12	M	2	Managerial
P 13	M	1+	Non-Managerial
P 14	F	1+	Non-Managerial
P 15	M	2+	Managerial
P 16	M	7	Non-Managerial
P 17	F	8	Non-Managerial

P 18	F	21+	Managerial
P 19	F	4	Non-Managerial
P 20	F	26	Non-Managerial
P 21	F	2+	Managerial
P 22	F	1+	Non-Managerial
P 23	M	1+	Non-Managerial
P 24	F	2	Managerial
P 25	F	1+	Non-Managerial
P 26	F	1+	Non-Managerial
P 27	M	32	Leadership
P 28	M	1+	Non-Managerial
P 29	F	2+	Non-Managerial

The participant in-person interviews were transcribed into Word files via Word Dictate

and downloaded in MAXQDA to initiate the coding process. The researcher employed the

MAXQDA software platform to code and analyze the discovered and anticipated themes, which

became evident early in the analysis stage. The research findings were specific to the hospitality

industry in the South Florida market, and the researcher addressed local market considerations

within the context of this section. For example, one local market consideration is the issue of

seasonality, hiring part-time or contracted employees during the winter season. Therefore, the

researcher interviewed only full-time employees who met the study's qualifications.

Furthermore, the presentation findings discovered in this qualitative study can be operationally

applied by heliotropic leadership in any service-related entity within the hospitality industry.

Discovered Themes

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), in qualitative research, "themes are broad units

of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 328). The

researcher began to notice discovered themes early in the interviewing process. For example, one of the most frequently emergent themes was the importance of proper and continuous training. While completing the coding process in MAXQDA, the researcher conducted an in vivo coding review of the study findings from the participants' perspectives for the development of the themes. Therefore, a concerted effort of impartial review was applied to ensure the validity and reliability of the research findings. As a result of this case study, the following five themes and two subthemes were discovered beyond the original three anticipated themes noted in Section 1, which were discussed before the research phase of this study. The researcher found that some terms were interchangeable in developing the five themes, overlapping as subthemes that added significance to the case study.

Table 2

Newly Discovered Themes

- Theme 1: Ensuring Proper Training (Employees/Leadership)

- Theme 2: Teamwork (Employees/Leadership)

- Theme 3: Leadership Engagement with Staff (Employee/Leadership)

    o Subtheme 3(a): Lead by Example

- Theme 4: Delivering High-Quality Services (Employees/Leadership/Guests)

    o Knowing Customers' Needs and Wants (Employees/Guests)

- Theme 5: Caring Organizational Culture (Employees/Leadership/Guests)

The above list represents the newly discovered themes and subthemes based on the findings of this research study and the use of MAXQDA. The common themes shared by most participants included the anticipated themes of communication issues, bilateral trust, commitment, and employee engagement. The researcher developed naturalistic generalizations

from analyzing the data findings, and therefore, generalizing that hospitality leadership can learn and apply the research findings to their service-related business (Creswell, 2014).

Interpretation of the Themes

According to Babin (2019), thematic interpretations are a useful analytical tool for all types of qualitative research, including case studies. The researcher began the interpretation of the themes by aggregating collected data into larger units of abstraction to properly understand and make sense of the findings through data analysis. The researcher eliminated personal interpretations based on hunches or intuition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As such, the researcher established patterns and focused on synergy between two or more codes in the MAXQDA data analysis to interpret the following themes:

Theme 1: Ensuring Proper Training

In the hospitality and tourism industries, leaders rely on frontline employees at all levels of job classification to deliver and maintain high-quality services to their customers. Johnson and Park (2020) stated that frontline service employees are the direct link between the organizational mission and operational strategy and the customers they service in their businesses. Their research focused on the importance of mindfulness-related training in the workplace to help increase relationship formation, team building, and employee well-being as an integral part of their daily routine and delivery of services. Johnson and Park concluded that training is ideal for frontline service employees, considering there is little room for errors since the production and consumption of services works simultaneously.

In this study, the researcher identified 18 out of 29 participants (62%) who mentioned the importance of proper initial and ongoing training for hospitality employees. As such, the researcher has narrated below a sample of seven participants' feedback on ensuring formal

workplace training. P29, P1, P7, P3, P4, P5, and P14 all stated everyday observations on the importance of proper onboard training and the need for continuous training concerning improving customer services. For example, P1 and P7 shared the need for both onboard training and constant training to adjust to an event that gives the guests a more favorable experience at the resort. P29 shared that training is everything. It would be best to have daily training updates on current operational changes within the five hotel properties. For example, if a restaurant is closed due to low census in one hotel, you must be able to direct guests to make reservations at other onsite properties. Furthermore, P29 discerned that daily training sessions are essential to keep all hospitality resort employees apprised of changes or overnight incidents. P29 concluded the interview with these words of wisdom: "Training is everything to everyone."

P3 shared similar observations to P29 on training consistency at the resort every hour of every day. The researcher noted an interesting statement from P3 on the comment that employees at the resort "wear the crown every hour and minutes to meet the five-star rating." P3, P4, and P29 shared that daily training before starting a shift is standard, and understanding the day's expectations is applied in their daily work assignments. It empowers the employee to know the proper steps to take on an issue and look for another alternative without someone looking over your shoulder. Johnson et al. (2018) stated that frontline hospitality employees must be engaged in practical training activities that enhance the delivery of their overall customer service tasks. Furthermore, Johnson et al. concluded that frequent changes in customer demands and the strong desire for optimal customer satisfaction in the hospitality sector have contributed to the need for higher-priority training.

P4 and P5 worked in the same banquet department of the resort. In the interviews, they shared the same observation that serving events can have last-minute changes, so proper training

allows them to adapt to a potentially changing environment. The researcher noted that both P4 and P5 mentioned the need for consistency in delivering the same level of high-quality services to the guests. According to P4, consistency is critical to providing superior services; however, no other participants mentioned this characteristic, which could be deemed more a departmental observation. P7 said that training needs are more challenging with different departments on the property and the need for proper onboard training is the time and place to start such training.

In the hospitality business, employees with front desk work assignments are the first point of contact with most customers. P14 shared that sometimes, a contentious discussion or experience with the person at the front desk can upset the guest for the remainder of their stay. P14 continued to share that proper training is crucial for these frontline employees since it empowers them to handle confronted issues and resolve them confidently. Ye et al. (2023) postulated that as a pathway to competitive advantage, there needs to be higher importance of attention by the organization to factors that help motivate and train frontline employees to engage in superior customer services. P14 stated, "After all, once you have the empowerment that you feel comfortable, you do what you can to help the guests have a great stay here." P7 further supported the fact that initial and ongoing training helps to fill the gaps between current practices and the need to improve future practices to make our guests want to return to the properties year after year. In summary, Johnson et al. (2018) contended that employee motivation for customer service training dramatically influences the perceived outcomes of the training provided by the organization, which often leads to higher job performance.

Theme 2: Teamwork

This research study discovered the common theme of teamwork and collaboration. Undoubtedly, teamwork is often the bond that holds most companies together and is one of the

antecedents to being a profitable organization. In a related study by Mumford (2015), the research suggested that each team member comes to the task at hand with different input levels, and collaboration through teamwork is essential to produce positive outcomes for the customers. Mumford concluded that effective teamwork in any industry type consists of the sum of the wholes being more significant than the sum of the parts, thus improving the collaboration of each team member.

The researcher in this study discovered that 15 out of 29 participants (52%) mentioned the importance of teamwork and collaboration for frontline hospitality employees. Most of the participants smiled when asked this question. As such, the researcher has narrated below a sample of five participants' feedback on ensuring that leadership encourages teamwork in the workplace. P3, P21, P6, P16, and P5 stated the following observations: P3 had an interesting response to interview question four on the importance of employee training and empowerment to improve customer loyalty. P3 mentioned that the staff needs to "turn the accommodation into an extraordinary experience for the guests." In doing so, leadership ensures that their employees have all the available tools to work as a team and be empowered to use those tools. P6 shared a similar observation with P3, where giving your employees the autonomy and empowerment to make proper decisions to improve customer loyalty, leaders need to work with solid teamwork, which is extremely important because it gives you a skill of aspiration. P6 continued to share that when employees receive proper training from their manager, it should give them a sense of being part of that team. This allows the employees to take ownership of their duties and form a cohesive bond with other team members.

Ye et al. (2023) suggested that teamwork starts with positive and ethical leadership, and there's no room in the hospitality environment for social loafing with managerial or frontline

staff personnel. P21 and P3 stated that it's essential to train your staff to be accommodating and friendly and build your team, which should come naturally in the hospitality business. P21 contended that frontline staff must go the extra mile as a team. According to P21, "When you do that, you hope that your customers and guests receive the best care and remember that experience and want to return to have that experience again." Collectively working as a team, the goal of each department and subsequent organizational objectives are met or exceeded. P3 summarized the interview with a footnote on the importance of being friendly to your guests.

As an administrative staff member, P16 shared that team building involved developing a close bond with each other, like a family bond, since staff work five days per week and are comfortable that the guest's information is true and accurate. Rao et al. (2021) mentioned a provocative observation from their decision-making research that not all hospitality employees are interested in sharing information with their co-employees. One could postulate that this action refers to the concept of job security. P16 shared that if "we don't develop those bonds, we all look like butt-heads to our guests." Rao et al. suggested in their bounded-rational study that hospitality management needs to take the lead to ensure the initial decision-making on exchanging knowledge between knowledge holders and receivers occurs and is effective. P5 gave an insightful observation that to build effective teams, leaders need to take charge and lead by example. P16 provided the best summary for this discovered theme, "You are only as good as your team."

Theme 3: Leadership Engagement with Staff

Leadership engagement with employees is crucial to developing more robust engagement from your employees to their customers. Joplin et al. (2021) suggested that when employees feel supported and treated equitably by their manager, the organization works more intensely for the

organization. Joplin et al. concluded that this passion makes employees feel safe expressing themselves and builds a more vigorous engagement with their manager and the organization.

The researcher discovered that 15 out of 29 participants (52%) mentioned the prominence of leadership engagement and relationship building for frontline hospitality leadership and employees. As such, the researcher has listed below a sample of five participants' feedback on ensuring that leadership encourages teamwork in the workplace. P27, P1, P12, P16, and P4 stated the following observations: P27 said to question one that leadership can train their employees on the company's values and build the right team on those relationships. P4 contended the importance of empowerment and gave the following insight, "My manager and director greatly empower me." However, the participant did offer the qualification that staff need to understand the chain of command for issues and problems out of their authority. Johnson et al. (2018) suggested that many hospitality firms lack sufficient research evidence that customer expectations and, in turn, customer satisfaction and loyalty are directly linked to the engagement levels of frontline hospitality staff. P27 averred that leadership wants to empower those employees within their personality and show a genuine desire to show customers they care for you in some way.

P12 and P16 shared a similar context to interview questions one and three: The workplace needs to be a continuous learning environment while developing your team and engaging your employees to share new knowledge while promoting a healthy atmosphere. It is incumbent for leadership to share not only organizational goals and objectives but also new innovative ideas. P16 shared the importance of leaders knowing their jobs, building employee confidence, and helping them engage with personal development. P12 was the only participant who mentioned the need for succession planning. P4 stated that empowerment has limits, where

managers must be involved in specific problems. In summary of this newly discovered theme, P16 showed that leaders must engage with their staff and act more as mentors. P16 shared, "I am here as your backbone, your support."

Subtheme 3(a): Lead by Example

As an outcome of the previous theme of leadership engagement by staff, the researcher discovered the secondary subtheme of leading by example toward your employees. The researcher identified lead by example as a subtheme of leadership engagement since several participants mentioned the importance of leading by example. Based on the findings, seven of twenty-nine participants (25%) stated that the subtheme of leading by example was an essential step to leadership engagement within the hospitality industry. Cheng and Wong (2015) suggested that leading by example is commonly known as acting as a proactive role model to your employees, which is considered a social learning theory. According to Cheng and Wong, "People acquire a large part of their behavior by observing and imitating others in a social context, and thus vicariously learn and modify behavior patterns through the psychological process of modeling" (p. 129).

The researcher has narrated below a sample of six participants' feedback on ensuring that leadership demonstrates the importance of leading by example in the workplace. P1 shared a relevant observation: " Everyone's more likely to follow suit when everyone from the top down behaves the same way in the application of their work, to make it some form of behavioral modeling." P1, P17, P4, P7, P10, and P5 stated the following observations: P5 shared the following statement on leading by example. As a manager, we should lead by example and treat team members like resort guests. P17 took the questions further and described leading by example as "super important." The hospitality industry is known for its propensity for high

attrition. P17 shared the following observation: dealing with hospitality guests face to face with real-time issues is crucial to see how managers deal with problems and learn from their actions. Cheng and Wong (2015) stated that frontline staff look towards their managers for guidance and examples. Considering globalization and workforce diversity in the South Florida marketplace, leadership by example becomes paramount to success in the hospitality industry.

P4 shared an interesting observation from the perspective of trust. Managers need to lead by exemplary examples. According to P4, trust is instrumental in keeping a level of consistency that if employees see you involved with the tasks at hand, they are more likely to follow the path that all your employees follow in the future. P10 shared a similar observation, noting that many employees work in the hospitality industry with little or no experience, and they need to understand and learn from their leaders the understanding of customer loyalty. P10 explained that teaching employees customer loyalty, giving them examples, and being there to guide staff in the right direction is imperative. P7 shared a similar observation: The first step as a manager is showing your team correct behavior towards teammates and customers. Leaders need to put a smile on their faces, come to work with a happy attitude, and look for ways to improve and be more efficient in their duties. P5 stated the following observation that all managers need to lead by example. As a managerial-level participant, P5 shared an interesting statement: showing your staff how you care for them, such as acknowledging birthdays and anniversaries and knowing the names of spouses or family members, goes a long way to building trust and setting the stage for leading by example.

Theme 4: Delivering High-Quality Services

Based on the findings, eight out of twenty-nine participants (28%) mentioned the importance of professionally trained staff delivering high-quality services to customers within

the hospitality and tourism industries. Zeqiraj and Nimani (2022) stated that successful

hospitality entities do not count solely on their products and services but, more importantly, on

how both features are delivered to the customer. The researchers emphasized the need for the

service to be provided by quality-oriented staff since the benefits are more significant than the

tangible products in the hospitality experience. However, these features contribute to the overall

customer experience in the service delivery process.

The researcher has narrated below a sample of six participants' feedback on ensuring

your staff delivers high-quality services to hospitality guests in the work environment. P1, P17,

P3, P18, P21, and P5 stated the following observations: For example, P1 noted a question that

staff needs to ask themselves, "When we talk about our guests, what do we learn about them

when they walk away from us"? P1 added that hospitality staff must know customers' needs and

adapt to deliver top-quality services. Armstrong and Kolter (2018) explained that understanding

customers' needs helps organizations cultivate their overall marketing strategy. P17 stated that

following through is also a considerable part of the hospitality business because you know the

staff must deliver on what they promise: excellent services. P17 continues to add that it all has to

do with the goal of customer loyalty. If the resort can offer a unique experience to its guests, the

company can encourage a repeat experience. P17 concludes that this mindset for your staff is

essential to the hospitality business. P3 shared a similar observation to P17: The organization

needs to turn the accommodation into an extraordinary guest experience. Leaders must ensure

their staff has the proper tools to deliver optimal services.

P18, a managerial department head, shared the following interesting observation: "It

comes down to genuine care for your guests because everyone can play lip service." P18

explains that it is doing the right thing and knowing that you can rely on or watch a leader who

goes out of the way for their staff. P18 shared an example of this theme, "I had this leader for many years, and this was a leader who, to this day, genuinely cared for the employees and guests for the best services possible." The researcher observed during the interview that the participant had a serious demeanor, delivering this observation.

Both P21 and P5 stated that leadership and employees must go the "extra mile" for their guests. The researcher noted that both P21 and P5 were managerial-level employees. P 21 shared that it's vital to be accommodating and friendly; customers remember these interactions. P5 stated that it's crucial to exceed your guests' expectations, making the experience memorable and setting the decision to return for a top-quality experience again.

Subtheme 4(a): Knowing Customers' Needs and Wants

The researcher identified a common subtheme of knowing the customer's needs and wants at the resort facility. This subtheme is one of the foundational building blocks of the marketing management framework and is examined under the theme of delivering high-quality services. Based on the findings, six out of twenty-nine participants (21%) mentioned the subtheme of knowing the needs and wants of your customers. Zeqiraj and Nimani (2022) stated that for hospitality organizations to achieve customer satisfaction and subsequent loyalty, the provider needs to anticipate the customers' needs and be able to satisfy those needs with exceptional quality services. Organizations that can understand and meet their customer needs gain greater profitability than those companies that fail to understand customer needs and, more relevantly, satisfy those needs (Armstrong & Kolter, 2018).

The researcher has narrated below a sample of four participants' feedback on the topic of knowing the needs and wants of your customers and being able to satisfy those customers' immediate needs in the workplace. P19 shared a relevant observation on this topic: "All of the

employees at the resort know and are trained to ask what we can do for the guests, what they need, and how we can help." P1, P22, P19, and P15 stated the following common observations: P1 has an extensive marketing background and education and shared some common terminology in the question responses. P1 noted that segmenting your business and allowing your staff to connect with your guests on a different level give them a personal relationship. It all comes down to knowing the needs of your guests, especially those who may be new to the South Florida area.

P22 stated that as part of the resort training, the staff learned how to ask the right questions about what the guests need and how we can accommodate them with these needs. It's all about keeping our guests happy so they want to return as much as possible. P15 shared a similar perspective as P22. As such, P15 stated, "Every person coming in is a VIP, and how you treat everybody coming in could be completely different from Mr. Smith, who just checked in." Furthermore, P15 was added to identify their needs, determine the purpose of the guest's stay, and cater to their experience accordingly.

Theme 5: Caring Organizational Culture

The participant's perception of organizational culture seems to be a critical precursor to the overall level of customer loyalty in the hospitality setting. What is considered corporate culture for non-managerial hospitality employees? Pizam (2020) defined hospitality organizational culture as "a system of shared norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and expectations whose ultimate goal is to provide exceptional service and memorable satisfactory experiences to all the organization's stakeholders" (p. 432). In shaping hospitality organizational culture and promoting a positive workplace, employee interactions with guests are more personal than in any other industry. As a result of these personal interactions with the customers, employee attitudes positively affect the guests' services (Russen et al., 2023).

The researcher discovered that nine out of twenty-nine participants (29%) mentioned the importance of a caring organizational culture for all stakeholders of the hospitality entity. As such, the researcher has narrated below a sample of four participants' feedback on caring corporate culture in the workplace. P2, P10, and P23 stated the following observations: P10 noted in response to question one, "You go to the job in a positive work culture in general, and it makes you want to come to work if you trust each other." The researcher did not consider the caring organizational culture as an anticipated theme; however, I observed that the resort genuinely cares for its employees and guests as I walked through the doors. P2 stated that cultural issues on a certain managerial level can negatively impact guests, which, according to P2, trickles down to every guest who registers with the resort. P2 is a non-managerial level team member with a strong sense of the importance of company culture. P23 stated that employees must communicate with our guests about what we can provide them. "It's part of our great culture here to give our guests 100% of our time and attention to make their stay a good experience."

Presentation and Visualization of the Data

During this qualitative study, twenty-nine professionally diversified participants (n=29) were interviewed in person and asked eight semi-structured questions about their experiences at the resort or previous hospitality experiences. The job classification of these team members ranged from front desk services, housekeeping, banquet, spa services, and restaurant staff members. In addition, the researcher interviewed ten frontline management-level team members and asked the same eight questions. For participants identified through job classification as managerial or leadership, the researcher asked two additional questions that pertained to their management role. In addition, member checking was applied to participants' interviews to allow

the interviewees to review and revise their transcripts. Furthermore, the researcher utilized data and methodological triangulation since the researcher used various data collection instruments such as one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, and initial focus group meetings with leadership, commonly used in case study research.

Job characteristics were identified: approximately 35% of participants were recognized at the managerial level (with one of the ten participants in a leadership position), and 65% were classified as non-managerial employees (see Table 1). Furthermore, the gender demographics for the study were nine male (31%) and 20 female (69%) participants. The average number of years of experience at this specific resort was as follows: 160+ years/29 employees = 5.5 years of experience at the resort on average. Furthermore, all participants in this study were active, full-time employees of the resort.

Table 3

Base Size, Run Length, and New Information Threshold

Interview No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
New IDI Themes	2	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
New Themes in Run					5										2
% Change over Base	40	0	20	0	40	50	0	0	0	50	0%	0%	0%	0%	Saturation

Interview No.	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	Total
New Themes IDI	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	7

New Themes in Run						0								0	7
% Change over Base	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	Saturation Point Met

The researcher noted a saturation point at the 11th interviewee level, using the Base Size, Run Length, and New Information Threshold methodology. For the sake of this study, the researcher noted in Table #-3 the first fifteen interviews for which the saturation point was reached within run #-2, and no new themes were discovered after four runs between the 16th and 29th interviewees. Guest et al. (2020) suggested that this method considered the context of inductive thematic analysis. The researcher supported the idea of a simple yet relatively measurable method to determine the saturation point to maximize the validity and reliability of the study. No new codes were discovered after the 10th participant interview; however, the researcher interviewed additional participants to elicit new themes from the findings.

At this point of the research process, the researcher decided to include an iteration process with additional participants in this study to elicit the possibility of gaining primary new data knowledge or new themes. Hair et al. (2018) suggested that the iteration process could uncover new issues, primarily by using interview notes and interviewing additional participants to elicit new primary data and subsequent themes. The researcher used interview notes (memoing) as part of the data analysis to ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings. In addition, the researcher used negative case analysis during this iteration phase. This task allowed the researcher to establish boundaries for the themes being developed within the scope of this qualitative study. According to Hair et al., "the general stance of qualitative researchers should

be skepticism towards the ideas and theories they have created on the data they have collected" (p. 242).

Based on the data analysis findings of numerous codes, five prominent themes of 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) caring organizational culture. In addition, two subthemes were discovered: 1) leading by example and 2) knowing customers' needs and wants, in conjunction with the original three anticipated themes of 1) leadership communications, 2) maintaining customer satisfaction, and 3) sustaining employee engagement. Babin (2019) suggested that case studies are commonly used in business research due to the frequent focus on identifying the relationships between individuals, such as the participants, standard functions within the organization, and the entity itself.

Figure 1

Proposed New Pathway to Customer Loyalty

The initial path taken was to establish the research questions for the study and interview questions around the problem statement. One consideration of the findings is that the researcher focused on the early stage of leadership behaviors since many of the discovered themes were directly relevant to sustaining customer loyalty. The researcher combined the totality of new and anticipated themes and developed a newly proposed pathway for achieving customer loyalty and subsequent competitive advantage. Furthermore, this study conforms to the quality standards and systematic rigor for validity, reliability, and overall trustworthiness to acknowledge the impression of quality associated with this research study (Ross & Johnson, 2020).

Relationship of the Findings

The findings from this research study were premised on the relationship between the discovered and anticipated project themes and their interactive synergy with the research questions, conceptual framework, literature review, and problem statement. The researcher asked numerous in-depth questions on leadership behaviors and their interaction with customer loyalty and subsequent competitive advantage. According to Babin (2019), in-depth interviews are similar in context to a clinical psychologist interview, with a different scope and inquiry purpose.

Research Questions

The research questions prefaced in this study were positioned around the problem statement to elicit a probing approach during the in-depth interview process. The researcher developed eight open-ended questions to discuss leadership behavior, customer loyalty, and their impact on sustainable competitive advantage. The interview questions were distinctively designed to address one or more research questions. According to Hair et al. (2021), to ensure high-quality data with valid and reliable measures, the researcher needs to utilize qualitative measures to assess the study's validity. The table below displays the correlation between the

research and interview questions.

Table 4

Relationship Between Research and Interview Questions

Research Question	Interview Question
RQ-1	I-1, I-4
RQ-1(a)	I-2, I-9, I-10
RQ-1(b)	I-1, I-3
RQ-2	I-1, I-2, I-4, I-9
RQ-2(a)	I-1, I-5, I-9
RQ-2(b)	I-1, I-6
RQ-3	I-7, I-1
RQ-3(a)	I-8, I-7,I-1

Two additional interview questions were presented and asked of frontline managers concerning their level of communication and engagement with their employees. More specifically, question 9: As a frontline manager, how often do you communicate with your employees on customer satisfaction, and question 10: As a frontline manager, what are the challenges you face with communication, collaboration, and trust? Both of these questions contributed to the context of research questions 1, 2, 2(a), and 2(b) from a managerial-level perspective. The section below describes randomly chosen participants' responses to the exploratory, open-ended research questions asked during the interviews.

Research Question 1. *What steps can South Florida hospitality industry leaders take with their employees to help promote customer loyalty?*

Research question one was explored by interview questions one and four, and the result was the discovery of a new theme of delivering high-quality services to promote customer loyalty. Koo et al. (2020) study indicated how strong customer loyalty could develop when service providers create solid and lasting emotional bonds with their customers. Examples of the theme arising include observations from six participants, P2, P28, P3, P6, P10, and P25. Participants varied in their responses and took extra time to cogitate their replies. P2 stated that listening to the guest is essential at the manager's level. What they're saying, their needs, what they're showing through body language, or if they're stressing about something. The objective is to help the guest feel important and to fix problems before they escalate into serious issues. That's often the best time for employees to build that bond of loyalty.

P28 and P3 shared similar observations to research question one. P28 stated that leaders need to work with their staff to build the confidence to handle the situation and work towards a perfect resolution for their customers. Knowing how to handle the problem and resolve it gracefully is essential. It demonstrates to the customers that we have the best interest of our guests in mind. The employees were able to get it done and solve it, and the guests could tell their friends and families about the positive experience. P3 shared a similar observation to P28. P28 shared that the staff needs to turn the accommodation into an extraordinary guest experience. The participant (P3) further stated that leadership must ensure employees have all the tools available to work promptly because staff only has limited time with the guests during their stay. The employees need the proper tools readily available instead of going back and forth at all times.

P6 shared an interesting observation that parallels the topic of leading by example. Management must show their employees respect and believe that the contagious experience must

be disseminated to the guests with respect and a hospitality smile. Welcome the guests, but if management does not do the same, the employees may have a chip on their shoulder, which is unsuitable for the business. So, the starting point is to show respect between the two sides, management and employees. P10 and P25 shared these supportive observations on the topic of operational communications. P10 shared that communication is vital for effective operations in hospitality. If it's effective, many employees may assume or they look or hear about what they want to hear or look at and make the right decision. P25 stated that leadership needs to listen to employees' suggestions, especially the ones that deal heavily with the guests. If you can come up with all the best ideas in the world, the customers may tell you whether or not they like your suggestions. P25 shared: "You could try a new idea and then listen to your employees' feedback." Min et al. (2021) contended that service employees' listening skills are one of the most vital tools for resolving customer complaints (Manusov et al., 2020).

Research Question 1(a). *What negative actions or behaviors do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that fail to promote customer loyalty?*

Research question one (a) was explored by question two and included interview questions nine and ten specifically asked of managerial-level employees to support the scale of this research question. The result of these questions' scope was to gain insight into negative actions or behavior by hospitality leaders that fail to promote customer loyalty. This theme includes observation from five participants, P2, P17, P5, P7, and 15. For example, P2 stated that a particular issue at a certain managerial level can undoubtedly have a negative impact on some of our guests, and that trickles down to even a family stay. If the manager prioritizes another guest or ignores their needs instead of taking care of an issue for a guest, she can see that being negative for the resort.

P17 shared an interesting observation on the theme of proper training. P17 stated that staff training is a bigger problem in this industry. At the resort, we do an excellent job. Leaders emphasize an effective plan, but training is super important and needs to be the foundation of everything staff do with customers. The resort wants to ensure that all our employees, including our managers and especially our employees, have that foundational training. As managers, they must have that foundational understanding of our staff's training needs and allow staff the autonomy to assist the customers and gain customer loyalty with their new information and acquired knowledge. P5 shared the following observation on the value of listening. P5 sometimes sees that even though staff listen to our guests' complaints or other comments, we sometimes don't give the guests sufficient time to express their concerns. As managers, we need to fully understand the situation and be able to handle the complaint properly. Min et al. (2021) suggested that if employees listen attentively and learn when to apologize, customers may believe their concerns are taken seriously. This action helps ensure trust and satisfaction between the facility and its customers.

P7 stated that most of the staff at the resort, including herself, may rush into making quick decisions, trying to be efficient and resolve things quickly. Every staff member needs to listen correctly to their customer complaints. With little thought or understanding of the issue, employees often devise a solution too soon until a manager from a different department may need to get involved. P15 stated the following exciting insight. Every guest coming into the resort is considered a VIP, and how you treat everybody coming in may be completely different from the last guest who just checked in. It is incumbent on the staff to identify their individual needs, determine the purpose of their stay, and cater for their experience accordingly. Suppose you cater to every experience with a cookie-cutter mentality; what would be the outcome? In that

case, you may set yourself up for failure. Staff needs to consider each guest's needs, regarding how satisfied the guest must be compared to if you accommodate every single guest with an individual level of catering. According to P15, your success rate should be much higher than being a cookie-cutter way of dealing with guests.

      Research Question 1(b). *What positive actions do South Florida hospitality industry leaders engage in that promote customer loyalty?*

      Research question one (b) was explored by interview questions one and three, and the results were the discovery of the new theme of leading by example. The scope of these questions was to gain insight into negative actions or behavior by hospitality leaders that fail to promote customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is critical for long-term profitability, success, and competitive advantage. Examples of this newly discovered subtheme arising include observations from five participants, P27, P6, P5, P17, and P2 observations, all of which were pertinent and similar to these questions:

      P27 holds a leadership position with the resort and shared the following positive action for leadership to engage in that promotes customer loyalty. P27 shared that he believes in building relationships with your team and employees first. It's an example of respect, trust, how they want to be treated, and how they should treat others. With this as the base, the leader can train the employees on their values, the set values for their organization. P5 shared that, as managers, we should lead by example. She likes to provide her staff members and team members with the same treatment as my guests. "So I want to remember special dates, birth, and anniversary are the names of their, you know, spouses, something special for them." P6 had the following observation: making a lasting impression on your guests. The first impression is the best. You can help turn issues around if they gain a positive first impression. But staff needs to

give them the first impression of genuine hospitality. "Welcome the guests, talk to them one-on-one, and make them feel at home. That is extremely important for them to feel welcome wherever they go in the resort. That is extremely important."

P17, an eight-year employee with the resort, stated that loyalty is a big word in the hospitality business. Loyalty between managers and employees and all customers leads to customer loyalty. So, it is similar to a chain reaction. Loyalty is also in the sense of taking care of the staff members. Anywhere from the wages to the breaks or the workload on the staff members. P2 stated that on different levels, personalization is genuinely what creates that next level, and it makes that next-level interaction. It establishes that next level of brand loyalty where it's not just, I got something welcoming or had a welcoming interaction.

Research Question 2. *What do employees need to know or learn from leadership to promote customer loyalty?*

Research question two was explored by interview questions one, two, and four, and the result was the discovery of the new theme of ensuring the implementation of teamwork and sustaining employee engagement. The researcher stipulated that the scope of this question was to gain insight into what employees need to learn from leadership to help the organization promote customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is critical for long-term profitability, success, and competitive advantage in any industry (Armstrong & Kolter, 2020). Examples of this theme arising include observations from five participants, P12, P2, P4, P5, and P1. For example, P12 stated comments based on team development; what's important for employers is to have a continuing learning environment. If you show interest in developing your team and showing them new ideas, it promotes a healthy atmosphere to show who is interested in succession planning. As part of the iteration process, the researcher noted in his observation notes that P12

was the only participant to mention the crucial issue of succession planning.

P4 shared further observations in a few words: training, training, and training! Do employees understand the importance of consistency or whether we deliver quality services to our guests? The trained staff gives an example of the hotel's quality rating that causes many guests to return yearly. They do so because the resort keeps their consistency, the delivery of our services, which is the perception of our property, what is being served, and the quality of our food is included in the consistency of quality, which is essential.

P2, P5, and P1 shared their observations based on the importance of communication that employees need to learn from leadership to promote customer loyalty. P2 stated that open communication from the leadership helps to show that is our goal. It is part of our goal within such a competitive field in South Florida. Open communication helps each associate excel in their work goal and get their buy-in. P5 stated that, as a member of management, the resort allows its managers and employees to go above and beyond and do whatever they need to do to please the guests. So, I have clear expectations from leadership and plan to do the same for my staff. According to Jones and George (2023), this exhibited human behavior is called Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), where employees go above and beyond the call of their duty, working for self-satisfaction at the expense of personal sacrifice.

Min et al. (2021) suggested in their research that as part of the communication process, service employees need to learn how to apologize after the customer states their complaint or comments, giving the customer a chance to be heard. P1 noted that effective communication works well for her team; sometimes, we only see how that most significant implication can impact another department. So, it's a challenge and always an opportunity for her department to communicate better at my executive levels, saying, "OK, we want to make these changes."

Research Question 2(a). *How important is hospitality leadership in promoting and demonstrating superior customer loyalty in their daily actions and words to their service staff?*

Research question two (a) was explored by interview questions one and five, and the result was the discovery of the new themes of employee engagement and proper employee training. The scope of this question was to gain insight into what employees need to learn from leadership to help the organization promote customer loyalty. Daft (2018) described that leadership could be a known process. Examples of this theme arising include observations from five participants, P12, P2, P4, P5, and P1, all of which were pertinent to this question: P2 stated that when changes occur at the resort, it is essential to know that top leadership has approved and support new changes. There are new expectations for management, and then management may have to change some procedures within their department at the line level, and it's essential to help those associates understand why policies may be changing. P13 added observations on both employee engagement and proper training. P13 said that employee engagement is critical, especially if you engage between various departments; you can work together and give the best experience to the guest. "Employee engagement has a direct link to improving your customer loyalty."

P3, P10, P13, and P21 all shared their observation on the essential theme of proper employee training. P13 shared that every stakeholder of the resort needs the training to be efficient. Training is one of the most critical tools for success. At the resort, we have seen that employees who did not have training in various departments or their department tend to leave the job early, affecting overall hotel customer service. The better the training, the better the chance for staff to be promoted and happy guests returning to the resort. P21, a managerial-level staff member, shared the following observation. To improve customer loyalty, ensuring your staff is

adequately trained is crucial. Returning to the spirit of hospitality, you can train team members to do the required job, but you can't necessarily teach them how to interact and serve hospitality guests. Therefore, leadership must ensure that proper training is ingrained in their daily systems. Johnson and Park (2020) contended that frontline employees are instrumental to the success of hospitality entities, and staff must be appropriately trained and managed to ensure such success. Leadership needs to review daily systems and training needs for effectiveness periodically.

P3 shared that training at the resort is every day on the hour. We wear the crown every hour and every minute to meet the five stars. So staff members are trained in the morning and expected to be apprised of new updates and events. And every day, there is something different we are asked to do. It is our job every day to check on every guest. P10, another managerial-level team member, shared that training is a massive answer to most issues with associates, which managers then monitor. P10 continues to share that managers consistently train associates to understand customer loyalty. Many people, especially on the frontline, may not have worked in a hotel or understood the importance of customer service. So first, teaching them customer loyalty, giving them examples, being their step by step, and leading by example is critical for resort managers.

Research Question 2(b). *What are the essential business characteristics that identify an effective hospitality leader?*

Research question two (b) was explored by interview questions one and six, and the result was the discovery of the new theme of engaging with employees, leading by example, and teamwork. The scope of this question was to gain insight into what employees need to learn from leadership to help the organization promote customer loyalty. Daft (2018) contended that leaders must set the company's vision and lead their employees by example for positive outcomes.

Examples of this theme arising include observations from P7, P17, P27, P8, and P25, all of which were relevant to this question on business characteristics of hospitality leaders. P7 shared the following with lead by example: the first step as a manager or a leader is to lead by example. It would be best if you showed the staff moral and ethical behavior. You have to show them that you love this place. You come to work happy that you're looking for different ways to do business, that you can break the routine with improvements and being efficient in your job, and have a smile on your face. It sounds basic, but these are the characteristics leaders must show by example.

P17, another eight-year employee of the resort, shared an interesting observation. Managers and employees need to have confidence in what they're doing because they know you're at the front desk and the face of the resort. So, it's essential to be the face of the resort with our knowledge in place because you can fix and resolve issues. Again, with that empowerment, staff members can make the situation better and more understood as part of our company culture. P27 stated, "I firmly believe in building relationships with your team and employees first. It's an example of respect, trust, how they want to be treated, and how they should treat others." Therefore, with this as the base, the leader can continue to build on those relationships and then train the employees in their values, the set values for their organization. P8 shared, "Hospitality gives you thick skin, but it's to that point where if you don't trust your leadership team management team, why would anyone want to stay and work for a company that doesn't see those employees' actions?

P25 stated a foundational observation that leaders need to listen to employees' suggestions, especially those dealing with emergent guest issues. Managers can come up with all the best ideas in the world; however, the customers tell you whether they like it. Therefore, the

prime priority is to listen to your employees' feedback. Min et al. (2021) discovered that overall

customer satisfaction mediated the influence of the employee's active listening skills.

Research Question 3. *How important is it for service industry employees and leaders to*

understand the meaning of competitive advantage?

Research question three was explored by interview questions one and seven, and the

result was the discovery of the new themes of cultivating a caring culture and understanding your

customer needs. In addition, interview question nine was asked explicitly of managerial-level

employees to support the reliability of this research question. The scope of this question was to

gain insight into what employees need to know and learn from their leadership on the issue of

competitive advantage in the South Florida hospitality industry. Lamb et al. (2019) shared a

simple definition that sustainable competitive advantage "is one that cannot be copied by the

competition" (p. 24). Examples of these arising themes include observations from three

participants, P1, P11, and P20, all germane to this question on competitive advantage in the

hospitality industry.

P1 stated an interesting perspective: small competition creates a healthy cultural

environment. "Then the employee can look outside the CompStat report and say, OK, the

Breakers is doing this, the Island is doing that, Eau Palm Beach is doing this, how can we do it

better?" Figure out what is being done, what's working, and what to learn and bring back in real

time. P11 stated a similar observation to P1, that every employee needs to be competitive; it's

essential because there are a lot of other hotels that guests can book. Even though the work ethic

might be similar, they might be doing something different that encourages their guests to return,

and the resort wants to be set aside and be different. P1 adds that perhaps, like our culture, it

makes us stand out and makes people want to feel what the resort is about and that what is

offered is superior to our competitors. P20, a four-year employee at the property, shared the

research question of competitive advantage at the resort spa. Competitive advantage is essential,

especially since this resort is number one. You know how important it is to hear that from your

manager, which is very important for morale. P20 stated that her manager is great and gives

feedback and lets her see the evaluation from the guests. Managers have to listen because they're

going to deal directly with the guests, and they have to have the ability to make employees feel

they can come to you. Dooley (2018) contended that repeat customer business may increase

when customer expectations are met. The resort's high reputation for exceptional quality services

helps customers return annually.

       Research Question 3(a). *What are the most important advantages a hospitality company*

can practice to achieve competitive advantage?

       Research question three (a) was explored by interview questions one, seven, and eight,

and the result was the discovery of the themes of maintaining customer satisfaction and effective

leadership communications. The scope of this question was to gain insight into what employees

need to know and learn from their leadership to achieve and sustain a competitive advantage in

the South Florida hospitality industry. Examples of this theme arising include observations from

three participants, P4, P8, and P10, all relevant to this question on sustaining competitive

advantage in the dynamic hospitality business.

       P4 shared that your managers, whom you know and trust, promote that we must be the

best because we want to be competitive. Consistency in our job is essential and leads to loyalty

to our clients, showing customers how important their business is to you. P8 stated that

employees must trust and gain confidence in their leadership team. That leads to the question,

"Why would anyone want to stay and work for a company that doesn't practice quality services

to stand out in the competition?" P10 stated that every employee's job is to communicate with the customers about whatever they know needs improvement. You may have to do that because you want that repeat business; you want the customer to return to gain loyalty at this resort rather than the competition. So, whatever you know, some of the more critical issues are essential concerns that need immediate attention.

Conceptual Framework

As discussed in Section 1, the conceptual framework builds on the five recursive concepts of leadership behaviors: relationship marketing, customer satisfaction, consumer loyalty, and sustainable competitive advantage. Collectively, these five concepts seek to answer the problem statement about achieving customer loyalty, which helps bridge the road to long-term competitive advantage. The five concepts of this study build on the synergy of each other and work interdependently on each concept. These interrelation concepts were considered in developing the research and subsequent interview questions.

Leadership Behaviors. The researcher dedicated most of the scope of this study to the two concepts of leadership behaviors and customer loyalty. As part of developing a new pathway toward competitive advantage, leadership behaviors were critical in ensuring managers adequately trained employees and consistently engaged with the customers to prompt repeat purchases and sustainable customer loyalty (Figure 5). Sheth and Ambika (2020) suggested the importance of behavioral and technical training for frontline customer support staff since service employees' dissatisfaction is reflected when they interact directly with the customers. Frontline employees must be empowered to allow prompt decision-making based on the customer's needs. For example, P14 and P4 shared their observations to support the need for attentive leadership behaviors in the workplace.

P14 shared that training is critical because sometimes a bad experience or conversation with the person at the front desk can make or break the guest experience. Empowerment is essential because there should not be an issue once you're confident in what you can do for the guest. After all, once you have the empowerment, you should feel comfortable and do what you can to help the guests have a great stay at the property. P4 stated that resort leadership needs to continue to lead by being an example. As a section leader, it's crucial for people who come with her to see her approach and thank them for their trust in every way. Not just the approach of the guests but also the setting of the events, the breakdown, and all the tasks involved. It's 100% important to keep their trust by example, so what you say is the path that we want it to be every time the resort has an event.

Relationship Marketing. This single concept needed to be thoroughly researched in this study; however, numerous participants mentioned the need to build employee-employer and employee-client relationships through relationship marketing. The researcher focused the scope of the research questions more on leadership relationships between staff and management-level team members. Several participants mentioned the importance of leadership training and empowerment for reinforcing and improving customer relationships between staff members and customers. Dooley (2018) stated that the customers are the principal reason that relationships with your customers are the most crucial part of any organization; it can only survive with its customers. P27 and P28 shared their observations to support the need for leadership to build stronger relationships with the employer-employee and customer-employee dyad.

P27 shared the following observation, "I firmly believe in building relationships first with your team and employees. It is an example of respect, trust, and how they want to be treated. And how they should treat others, such as our guests." With this as the base, the leader can then

train the employees on their values, the set values for their organization. P28 stated that the most significant issues, like training and empowerment, go hand in hand as you try to keep up with all the proper training program needs. If staff does not feel confident and capable of doing what they were trained to do, it may be perceived as a negative experience, and the guests may not return for another stay. Create the positive image of the resort you want to put out for the guests, and it's just the same with empowerment. P28 shared, "You can be empowered to do great things, but you must know how to build a mutual relationship."

Customer Satisfaction. The conceptual framework of customer satisfaction in hospitality organizations is often downplayed by focusing on short-term transactions at the moment rather than building long-term relationships to achieve customer satisfaction. Gremier et al. (2020) argued that building on the solid context of long-term customer relationships and increasing the perceived value of a service can lead to a viable pathway to customer satisfaction. Within this study, the researcher developed several research questions and subsequent interview questions on customer satisfaction and loyalty since customer satisfaction is the antecedent to sustainable customer loyalty (Cudby, 2020). P6 and P9, both male non-managerial staff members, shared their observations to support the need for leadership to assist their employees in promoting customer satisfaction and building long-term relationships with their customers.

P6 stated an exciting observation: Giving your staff the autonomy to improve customer loyalty training is vital because it gives you a sense of aspiration. Whenever you get training from your manager, you go to training, then you come back to your work site, and it is up to you to do your job and give the customers great satisfaction in their experience. P9 shared the following comment. As customers develop more than just a connection, it's a personal connection with you. Employees need to be more personally connected with customers and get

to know their needs at the resort. For example, staff should get to know their birthdays, anniversaries, and the purpose of their stay. "You know we're here to do our job, have excellent service, and satisfy your guests. So, it just needs to be more personal with them." Lee (2021) stipulated that effectively collecting personal information on guests offers superior organizational communication directly with the customer, creating an environment to maximize personalized services.

      Customer Loyalty. The researcher focused the scope of this study on the primary concepts of leadership behaviors and customer loyalty. The conceptual pillar of customer loyalty was a crucial goal for hospitality employees to understand its importance with unparalleled commitment and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, customer loyalty was the foundation for developing the new pathway to sustain competitive advantage (Figure 5). Slack and Singh (2020) studied the two-dimensional relationships between behavior and attitudes to recognize the significant increase in customer loyalty to a predictive service. Frontline hospitality employees need to be trained appropriately and understand that loyal customers share their stay experience with family, friends, and online social media and help promote them via word-of-mouth advertising their positive experience. Based on the findings of this topic, P13 and P27 shared their observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to promote customer loyalty through the eyes of their employees.

      P13 stated that employee engagement is to improve your customer loyalty. Training is one of the most critical tools for success. Employee engagement is significant, especially if you engage between various departments; you can work out together and give the best experience to the guests and trust in their loyalty to come back. At the resort, P13 added that we have seen that employees who did not have training in various departments or their department tend to leave the

job early, affecting overall hotel customer service. The better the training, the better the chance

for staff to be promoted and happy guests returning to the resort. P27 shared this comment about

improving customer loyalty. As a manager, you want to encourage the team and have them

know that if they see a situation, you want to resolve it. First, you want to give them the tools

they're set up for success. It's not flagrant training; it's the ability to know if there's a situation.

  Competitive Advantage. The strategic goal of any profit-oriented hospitality

organization is to sustain a competitive advantage in the marketplace. The researcher focused on

the previously mentioned constructs in this study to gain perceptiveness on the building blocks

(pathways) to this strength of competitive advantage. Thompson et al. (2018) contended that

tomorrow's competitive advantage sources are the skill sets and power of leadership, keeping

your employees engaged with the needs of the customers and the mission, vision, and strategic

fit of the organizational culture. Based on the findings of this research study, P20 and P27 shared

similar observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to promote the importance of

gaining customer loyalty to sustain a competitive advantage for the organization. P20 shared that

competitive advantage is essential, especially with this hotel being number one. You know how

important it is to hear that from your manager on this critical issue. Because they have, many

times you can talk to people, but they don't listen to you; they have to listen because you're going

to deal with the guests and a reason they have to have the ability to make employees feel they

come to you and trust you. P27 stated the following observation: some of the issues he noticed

have been the scripted responses that some organizations try to hone in on, which take out some

of that person's personality. They feel a little nervous about how I constantly need to use this

organizational language. Or specific scripts by responding, and it becomes natural, and as a

client, a guest member on the receiving end, you don't feel it's a little robotic that we don't do

that here. The resort wants a personality that cares for hospitality to be natural in that conversation.

This qualitative case study of the South Florida resort shows the existence and benefit of a solid organizational culture between leadership and their employees and a high level of employee engagement to ensure and maintain customer loyalty. The conceptual framework demonstrated that the managerial and non-managerial members of the company provide a cohesive daily operation plan to deliver top-quality services and give their guests the experience expected from the Forbes five-star resort.

Anticipated Themes

As discussed in Section 1, the researcher identified three anticipated themes based on the literature review analysis and in collaboration with the context of this study. As such, the researcher employed the pattern-matching logic technique since this study is based on the context of case study analysis. Yin (2018) postulated that an empirically-based pattern is based on the study's findings while pattern-matching predicted descriptive features and themes before data collection. Yin further stated that the internal validity of an investigation is strengthened when themes discovered from the data analysis findings correspond with the anticipated themes. The three major themes noted from the literature review and applied to this case study were 1) leadership communications, 2) maintaining customer satisfaction, and 3) sustaining employee engagement. Based on the findings of this vital topic, P1, and P20 shared their observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to promote the importance of gaining customer loyaltyto sustain a competitive advantage for the organization.

Anticipated Theme One. Leadership Communications: This critical theme was among

the most mentioned themes in this research study by most participants in determining the effectiveness of leadership's role in communicating with subordinates. Thelen (2021) suggested that effective communication feedback involves leadership ensuring that employees capture and maintain the correct message and disseminate a concise statement of the expected performance standards in conjunction with a sense of recognition for their performance efforts. The researcher discovered that sixteen out of twenty-nine participants (66%) mentioned the importance of leadership communication for all stakeholders of the hospitality entity. Based on the findings of this anticipated theme, P10, P15, and P26 shared their observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to maintain consistent customer satisfaction and promote the importance of gaining customer loyalty to sustain a competitive advantage for the organization.

P10 shared with the researcher that communication is crucial for effective communication in every part of hospitality. If communication is ineffective, many people assume they look or hear about what they want to hear or look at and give their perspective, or they do something different because it was not communicating with the employee properly. P15 stated that good communication with my leaders is crucial regarding how we communicate and what we communicate to the employees so that they have a clear structure of what's going on. As a managerial employee, she would over-communicate rather than under-communicate regarding keeping employees informed, a sign of a strong leader. P26 shared the following observation as a non-managerial employee at the resort. She believes that effective communication is essential, and she thinks it's not only crucial with the managers because if we're being held to a certain standard, everyone should also be held to that particular standard, especially the regular staff and the manager, supervisors, all of that is so important. Based on the research findings, effective

communications with your employees and reciprocal communications with your customers are the antecedents to sustaining long-term customer loyalty.

Anticipated Theme Two. Maintaining Customer Satisfaction: one of the steppingstones to long-term trust, commitment, and loyalty of customers. Kim and Lee (2013) shared that when examining consumer behavior characteristics, most research studies with hospitality companies focused on trust, commitment, value, quality, satisfaction, and loyalty, to name a few behavioral factors. The researcher in this study discovered that seven out of twenty-nine participants (24%) mentioned the importance of maintaining customer satisfaction as a stepping stone to customer loyalty. Based on the findings of maintaining customer satisfaction within the organization, P5, P7, and P10 shared their observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to promote the importance of trust and commitment to lead and sustain customer satisfaction.

P5 shared that if employees don't go above and beyond or exceed expectations, staff always feel like they're not doing their job and not keeping the customers. So we must never forget to go the extra mile to keep those customers because they can. One review, one good word that they put on their website, they can bring back, as you know, more guests to the resort. P7 stated that trust is vital because you have to show that guests or members can trust you. For example, the guest can trust you with his ID, can trust you with the rules that you provide, and can trust you with the directions that you provide for the trust you have to demonstrate. More importantly, staff must know what you're talking about and be credible. P10 stated the following comment on the importance of trust. Trust is essential because you must be trusted as frontline associates to do the right thing with the guests. Depending on your leader and manager, steering employees in the right direction would be best. It would be best if you always built trust because the resort wants to give our guests the best service and earn their satisfaction.

Maintaining the overall satisfaction of your customers was determined in this study to be a critical consequence of customer loyalty and retention. As mentioned within the literature review, customer satisfaction has been adopted to examine marketing and consumer behaviors, especially in service-related industries.

Anticipated Theme Three. Sustaining Employee Engagement: Maintaining customer loyalty drives sustainable engagement between leadership, employees, and subsequent employees and customers. Joplin et al. (2019) suggested that employees engaged with their job duties (and customers) have a higher sense of motivation and are willing to devote the time and effort to perform expected services at their optimal performance level. In this study, the researcher discerned two missing themes, proper staff training and organizational culture, which should have been identified as anticipated themes before conducting the research findings. The researcher discovered that fourteen out of twenty-nine participants (48%) mentioned the importance of promoting employee engagement and delegating decision-making to reliable frontline employees to resolve customer service issues. Based on the findings of this vital topic, P13, P10, and P23 shared the following observations to support the need for hospitality leadership to promote employee engagement with their staff to enhance the foundation of customer loyalty.

P13 stated that employee engagement is to improve your customer loyalty. Everyone needs training to be efficient. Training is one of the most important things. As employees, the staff has seen that people who didn't have training in various departments or their departments tend to leave the job early, affecting overall hotel customer service. Employee engagement is critical, especially if you engage between multiple departments; you can work together and give the best experience to the guest. P10, a six-year manager with the resort, shared that the number

one priority is to train your employees correctly. As managers, the focus needs to be where

employees' knowledge levels are during the hiring process and where they need to be during

various points in their employment, which won't be such a battle if managers set expectations

initially. So you train them properly with the right training program. Giving feedback,

empowering them, and doing that positive reinforcement keeps them more engaged with the

guests. P23 stated that employee engagement is significant to customer loyalty because allowing

employees to do things themselves enables them to change more for specific types of customers.

"So, it's different for every customer; a customer would feel more inclined to return if they had a

more positive personal experience."

During the participant interviews, the researcher noted the high degree of positive

comments on employee engagement and their expressed commitment to the resort. Johnson and

Park (2020) contended that engaged employees are often immersed in their duties and less likely

to resign, reducing turnover. According to Joplin et al. (2021), when employees believe their job

has meaning and can meet work demands, they seem more invested in being physically,

emotionally, and cognitively engaged with their job (Rich et al., 2010).

The Literature

The literature was extensive on numerous hospitality operational and behavioral articles;

however, more attention was emphasized on customer loyalty and the effectiveness of positive

leadership behaviors. For example, the researcher identified similarities through the prior

literature review in Section 2 and the research findings that effective communication was

imperative to sustain customer loyalty and repeat purchases of services for your business.

According to Lee (2021), service-related entities must create a communicative environment to

maximize personalized services to collect personal information on customers effectively. This

observation has more relevance for the hospitality industry, which is sensitive to knowing the needs and wants of its customers. P1 stated: "So I think being able to communicate to our team that supports us that what we have for them at this resort is valuable."

P2 shared the following comment: Listening to the guest truly is crucial. Their needs and body language may be exhibited by what they're saying. If the customer is stressing about an issue or concern, in particular, to help the guest feel important, staff members must listen to what the customer is sharing and offer to fix the problem. That's often the best time that we can build loyalty. P10 shared that communication is crucial for effective communication in hospitality. If it is ineffective, many employees assume they look or hear about what they want to hear or look at and could do the wrong thing, or they do something different because it's not the correct way it was communicated.

In Section 2 of this study, the theories illustrated in the literature review were expectancy-confirmation theory (ECT), satisfaction-loyalty theory (SLT), commitment-trust theory (CTT), and Porter's Competitive Advantage Theory. Based on the study's findings, all these theories were evident. One of the marketing theories considered in the literature findings, Porter's Competitive Advantage Theory, stipulated that to maintain a real competitive advantage when compared to your rivals, you must operate at a lower cost, which may command a premium price or both (Porter, 1985). In this case study, the findings denoted that the resort builds on its efficiencies and economies of scale to provide low operating costs while setting premium prices for a luxury experience for its guests. P20 shared that every employee must understand that competitive advantage is essential, especially since this resort is number one. Staff often know how important it is to hear this from your manager. Employees must listen to

the customers at the resort because they are the first line of communication. Managers need to be able to make employees feel they come to them and establish trust with their manager.

Another example of theories discussed in this study is commitment-trust theory (CTT). Alzoubi et al. (2020) indicated the significant effect of how service quality interrelates with trust, satisfaction, and long-term customer commitment. Alzoubi et al. further explained that trust is one of the most confirmed constructs in relationship marketing research. To reinforce the similarities between the literature and research findings, P27 shared, "I'm always a firm believer in that, where you build that trust with the employee, and you strengthen that relationship because now it opens up for correction and trainability and the ability to teach." P10 stated that trust is essential because you must trust the frontline associates to make the right decisions with the guests. You need to trust your leader and manager to steer you correctly. It would be best if you always built trust because we want to give our guests the best service and earn their satisfaction and commitment.

This case study and corresponding literature examined the interactions between leadership behaviors and their employees' support and level of engagement and how these organizational interactions established a newly defined pathway to customer loyalty and sustainable competitive advantage in the dynamic South Florida marketplace. Nejati et al. (2020) suggested that ethical leadership behaviors are crucial when establishing employee engagement, creating a positive and engaging work environment, and creating a solid corporate culture and organizational success. According to Russen et al. (2023), "The importance of organizational culture throughout the whole HR process, starting from the stage of recruiting and selection. Job candidates are often selected based on shared values, thus a 'fit' to the organization" (p. 466).

During the interviewing process, several participants discussed how the resort leadership went above and beyond for the employees and guests to demonstrate their level of support and engagement. For example, P5 stated, "On one occasion when the employee parking garage was needed for a large group event, the resort provided parking at a local church and transportation to their cars to accommodate the employees' 24-hour schedule needs". As an observation for this study and some responses to participant interview questions, the resort finds employees' suggestions and ideas to improve customer satisfaction invaluable since all managers welcome employees to communicate new ideas and recommendations through daily or weekly meetings.

The Problem

As noted in Section 1, the specific problem to be addressed was the potential inability of South Florida service industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage. The researcher contacted a premier Forbes five-star hotel resort entity in South Florida to conduct the research necessary to analyze this problem. As for most hospitality entities, employee turnover is one of the most critical issues for discussion. According to the senior leadership of the resort, the employee turnover rate was approximately 31%, compared to an industry average of 68%. (Figure 5). According to hospitality employee turnover tendency research conducted by Datta (2020), hospitality employees want their leadership to be approachable and attentive to their needs. At the same time, hospitality employees need their direct supervisors to emphasize high standards of job performance, thereby being more of a role model and leading by example. Datta concluded that most hospitality employees focused their intentions to stay with their employer by looking at the leadership attitudes as more of a mentor who stays aware of the problems and needs of their frontline employees.

Figure 5

Employee Turnover Rate - Hospitality

Employee Turnover Rate
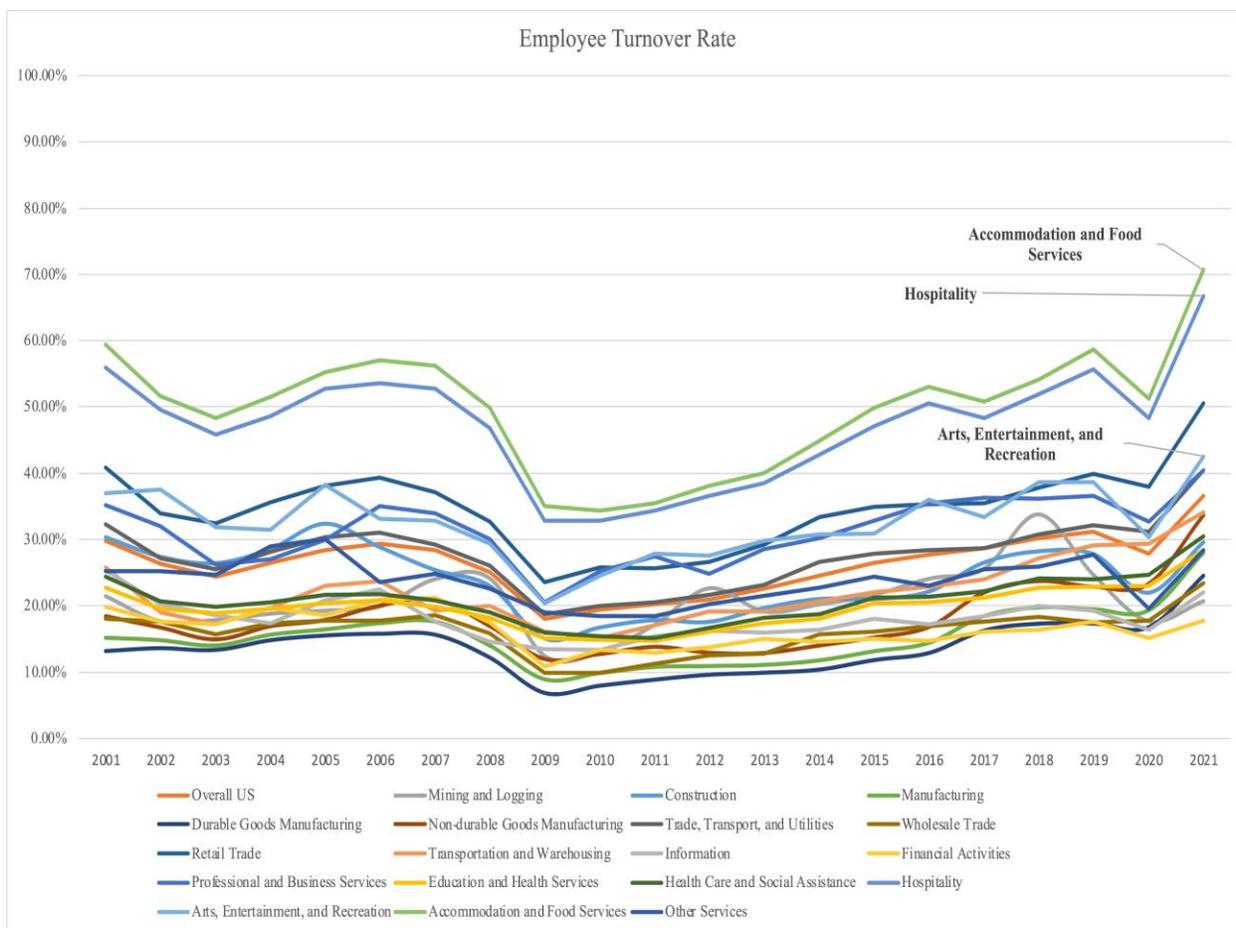
(Source: Dogru et al., 2023, Tourism Management, Vol. 99)

Undoubtedly, a dynamic industry with such a high percentage of employee attrition is an operational challenge for senior hospitality leadership. Dogru et al. (2023) commented that one of the ways for hospitality companies to improve their competitive advantage was to improve their employee retention rates, especially after the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the researcher chose a premier hospitality organization with a low employee turnover rate and a premier ranking on the Forbes five-star list of hospitality excellence.

Obiekwe et al. (2019) suggested that satisfied employees, commitment, loyalty, and extra efforts are crucial for the success of an organization.

This case study examined the participants' attitudes and perceptions that contributed to how leadership behaviors directly impacted employees' engagement, all of which influenced the quality of services delivered to resort guests. The study also analyzed how the interaction of the leaders and employees affected hospitality customers within the duality of loyalty and future business and referrals. As part of this research study, the researcher asked all participants to answer interview question #2: What negative actions or behaviors do hospitality managers practice that could fail to promote customer loyalty? The response rate was 100% with varied responses, such as the observation from P2 that a particular issue on a certain managerial level can undoubtedly have a negative impact on some of our guests, which trickles down to even a guest and their family. If the manager prioritizes another guest or ignores their needs instead of taking care of an issue for a guest, she can see that being negative for the resort.

The road to optimal business success is long and time-consuming. It involves hiring the best employees who fit the organization's strategy, ensuring proper training and development, and cultivating a quality-oriented culture through customer satisfaction, loyalty, and subsequent competitive advantage. Only a few hospitality entities succeed in achieving the goal of sustainable competitive advantage. Based on the research findings, the participants shared observations that the resort leadership had an unquestionable commitment to their employees and equally to their guests.

During the research process at the resort, the researcher observed that leaders and employees had a high level of respect for each other, especially in difficult times when dealing with customer issues. The researcher noticed that communication, trust, and collaboration were

exhibited daily and supported through daily and weekly staff meetings. For example, P18, a twenty-one-year resort manager, shared that cooperation and trust come down to someone who shows confidence is earned. Sometimes, you've worked to a point where you have established yourself in a work environment and have credibility in terms of tenure, and you show performance and results. There needs to be a discernable level of hands-off supervision and let the employee prove and earn trust.

In review, the researcher discovered through this case study that hospitality leadership needs to ensure employees are engaged with their jobs; such actions help to reduce employee turnover and develop a strong culture of employer-employee commitment. For example, P8 stated, "Hospitality gives you thick skin, but it's to that point where if you don't trust your leadership team, management team, why would anyone want to stay and work for a company that doesn't see those employees' actions"? The proposed redesigning of a new pathway to customer loyalty for competitive advantage starts with hiring committed employees, providing the staff and managers with proper training, cultivating the work environment to promote a superior organizational culture, and enhancing employee engagement to deliver exceptional quality care to your customers. Obiekwe et al. (2019) stipulated that "total organization performance depends on the efficient and effective performance of individual employees who work in the organization" (p. 6).

Summary of the Findings

In summary, Section 3 focused on the study's data findings, the discovery of new themes, the review of data findings with previous literature review, and the implication of the results on the problem statement. The researcher selected a premier hospitality resort with a low employee turnover rate and a premier ranking on the Forbes five-star list of hospitality excellence. Twenty-

nine professionally diversified participants (n=29) were interviewed in person during this study. The study participants of the resort met the minimum qualifications, and 100% were employed with the facility for more than one year of direct services. The job composition of these participants was one in a leadership role, nine managers, and nineteen frontline staff employees. They were asked eight semi-structured questions about their experiences while working at the resort or previous hospitality experiences.

The participant in-person interviews were transcribed into Word files via Word Dictate and downloaded in MAXQDA to initiate the coding process. Member checking was applied to each participant's interviews to allow the interviewees to review and revise their transcripts. As a result of this case study, five themes and two subthemes were discovered beyond the original three anticipated themes noted in Section 1. The researcher identified similarities through the prior literature review in Section 2 and the research findings that effective communication was imperative to sustain customer loyalty and repeat purchase of services for your business. The study also analyzed how the interaction of the leaders and employees affected hospitality customers within the duality of loyalty and future business and referrals.

As noted in Section 1, the specific problem that was addressed was the potential inability of South Florida service industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage. Through this case study, the researcher discovered that hospitality leadership needs to ensure employees are engaged with their jobs; such actions help reduce employee turnover and develop a strong culture of employer-employee commitment (Figure 1). Furthermore, this qualitative research discovered the five new critical themes of 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) developing and maintaining a caring organizational culture. Furthermore, this

case study proved to fill the gaps in research knowledge on redesigning an effective pathway to customer loyalty for sustainable competitive advantage.

Application of Professional Practice

In this comprehensive case study, the researcher employed an inclusive approach to developing relations between the hospitality leadership behavior practices through the various organizational stages leading to customer loyalty and with the operational performance goal of sustainable competitive advantage. The outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted the operational practices within the tourism and hospitality industries. For example, changes in consumer preferences, innovative buying patterns such as online purchases, and recruiting more committed staff members to work in customer-centric business units such as restaurants and hotel staff were problematic (Zwanka & Buff, 2021). Furthermore, this study developed a newly proposed pathway that hospitality and other service-related industries can apply in their business practices to improve their commitment to customer loyalty.

Improving General Business Practices

The researcher aimed his initial scope of this study towards the tourism and hospitality industries; however, the findings can be applied to any service entity, such as banking, healthcare, and retail, to name a few. Like hospitality, these service businesses are based on the interactions between their frontline employees and end-user customers. For example, improving the communication channel between frontline hospital staff and their leadership team can increase patient loyalty and sustainable competitiveness within their service area. In addition, any successful service company needs trust and commitment from employees to leadership and leadership back to the employees. Leaders must cultivate interpersonal relationships to help inspire their frontline employees to promote and sustain exceptional services. Furthermore,

failure to provide employees with the proper level of trust and a transparent understanding of the organization's mission and commitment to customer loyalty leads to lower productivity and, subsequently, decreased profitability. Lee and Park (2021) stated that trust, commitment, and interpersonal relationships directly impact the consumers' purchase decisions and act as antecedents to customer loyalty.

Regardless of the type of service business operating in today's competitive and post-COVID-19 environments, two of the fundamental precursors for a successful organization are committed employees and financial profitability. Koo et al. (2020) argued that sustainable customer loyalty is critical for long-term profitability, success, and competitive advantage in the market. Due to past COVID-19 restrictions practices, service entities such as hospitality and restaurants adopted "untact" services using new technology that facilitates customer interactions without face-to-face contact with service employees (Lee & Lee, 2020). For example, automated check-in services, machine-dispensed key rooms, and non-contact room service, to name a few. However, a crucial question remains: How much face-to-face interaction do customers expect from service providers such as hospitality? Based on the researcher's findings, service customers expect personalized interaction that needs to exceed the customer's expectations. For example, service customers expect employees to acknowledge guest names and important dates such as birthdays or anniversaries and deliver quality to the customer's needs. Banyte et al. (2016) stipulated that personalization is the combination of organizational values and experience of services leading to optimal customer satisfaction. Service entities must provide exceptional customer services that exceed their expectations, achieve customer retention, and obtain word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals leading to customer loyalty (Basari & Shamsudin, 2020). In the service industry, customers are not buying a tangible product. Customers buy the experience and

the expertise of the company representatives -the employees and managers to provide memorable results that satisfy their needs and promote the importance of repeat business decisions by the customers (Chaithanapat & Rakthin, 2021).

Service leaders continuously strive to improve their operational business practices and begin to understand the importance of employee-leadership trust and relationships. Based on the findings in this case study, there's more importance on the internal employee-employer relationship links than the external link between employees and customers. Service managers need to cultivate more effective teamwork, better communications, and a caring organizational culture that drives quality in the delivery of services to their customers. Leadership needs to provide their service employees with proper training on the first day of orientation and promote a company culture that encourages training in their daily routine. Joplin et al. (2021) contended that influential leaders needed to develop vigorous engagement and open channels of communication with their employees, with the strategic goal that this same engagement interaction should become a business practice between the employee and their customers. Furthermore, leaders must have that innate passion, drive, and commitment to ensure proper training and continuous ongoing coaching of their employees to deliver quality customer service and improve customer loyalty. In summary, promoting leadership passion as part of your company culture in conjunction with proper training and consistent encouragement should motivate frontline employees to instill in behavior the importance of quality service delivery and demonstrate this positive practice in their daily routine.

Potential Application Strategies

In this study, the researcher focused on the influence of how service organizations can develop a perspicacious pathway to customer loyalty and the perceptive steps to sustain this

strategic goal. The researcher first concentrated on the newly discovered themes (and subthemes) and included the anticipated themes in applying long-term strategies. According to Smith (2015), strategic management involves amalgamating both short-term and long-term views, which involves detailed preparatory work before implementing and using strategies. With this understanding in his research findings, the researcher attained several operational strategies that any service-related organization can successfully implement, contributing to his research themes.

The research case study outcomes contended potential application strategies for cultivating effective internal relationships between leadership and employees. In addition, these self-motivated relationships need to be developed into daily practices that promote high-quality delivery of services to customers with the external long-term goal of maintaining customer loyalty. In the hospitality industry, managers often need to be more active in this crucial step due to a preconceived attitude that employees in this field work with a short-term employment objective. Obiekwe et al. (2019) contended that employees' satisfaction and commitment to their jobs often yield the extra effort to sustain the success of an organization. Through the participant interviews and observations, data findings concluded that hospitality leaders need to promote teamwork by example and engage with their employees to build trust and self-confidence and encourage collaboration in the daily duties of their subordinates.

The need for a caring organizational culture can be instrumental in cultivating the employer-employee and employee-to-customer relationship and enhancing positive business outcomes. Smith (2015) suggested that if leadership can develop and articulate the company culture, then shaping the focused attitudes of the employees using a sympathetic approach makes it functional for the organization to gain better ways to improve the customer experience. Hollebeek and Rather (2021) suggested that customer-perceived value should be based on the

customer's experience, as seen through the eyes of the customer. Research findings in this study yielded that a caring organizational culture is critical to making hospitality employees understand and practice the company's norms and provide top-quality services with a memorable experience for all stakeholders. Leadership is responsible for ensuring that frontline employees embrace the organization's cultural norms and values to create a purpose of higher expectations and customer service excellence.

The research data collected from the interview findings revealed that leading by example was another critical practice strategy that leaders must embrace and apply in their daily duties. Several participants mentioned during the interview that managers must be able to talk the talk but know how to walk the walk when discussing lead by example. Most frontline employees identify their managers with professionalism and as an available knowledge resource. Cheng and Wong (2015) stipulated that professionalism is more than being well-spoken or a person's physical appearance. It is also an assortment of human, conceptual, and technical skills that set one's strengths, attitudes, and values toward high-quality service to other people.

Lastly, another application of an operative business strategy is maintaining effective and open communication between the employees and leadership. In his research, effective communication between employers and employees was one of the most common themes (66%) shared by the data of the research participants. As in any relationship, business or personal, communication is an antecedent to the successful outcome and building dynamic of the relationship. Thelen (2021) contended that it is the responsibility of leadership to ensure that the employees capture the correct message, and the channel to disseminate the information needs to clearly state the expectations of the performance efforts decoded by the receiver of the message.

Summary of Application to Professional Practice

The researcher employed a holistic approach to developing relations between the hospitality leadership behavior practices through the various organizational stages leading to customer loyalty and with the operational performance goal of sustainable competitive advantage. The researcher's findings can be applied to any hospitality or other service-related entity due to the nature of each business; the constructs of each service business are built on the dynamics of the relationship between the employer and the frontline employees. The results from this case study strengthen the need to solidify trust between employers and frontline services employees and parlay that earned trust into the foundation of a caring organizational culture with open communications and a mission of teamwork and mutual respect. In summary, the research findings and proposed pathway serve as an instrumental tool for service business leaders.

Recommendations for Further Study

A literature review summary demonstrated a need for more academic research into several new themes discovered in this case study. For example, Chandni and Rahman (2020) explored the issues of customer engagement and employee engagement in a service industry and how their study enunciated a need for previous empirical research in several service industries. Within this study, the researcher noted similar further research comments as a common theme throughout the literature review. As part of the findings in this study, future research should examine how leadership behaviors affect customer loyalty goals in other service industries such as healthcare, banking, or other hospitality entities. The pathway from hiring qualified employees and managers through and including the customer loyalty process to gain a competitive advantage is challenging. Furthermore, how many service organizations claim they have achieved the strategic goal of sustainable competitive advantage?

This study was limited to a Forbes 5-star luxury resort located in the South Florida market as a focus of this qualitative study, using active employees as participants to gain knowledge on the research problem. Recommendations for further research could focus on other highly reputable hospitality resorts in South Florida or different geographic locations comparable to the demographics of the resort. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher plans to use this qualitative study as a foundational platform to launch new case studies on similar problem statements premised with a reputable healthcare organization.

Reflections

During this case study, I had the good fortune of working with the leadership and employees of one of the preeminent luxury resorts in the South Florida market. Experiencing first-hand the trust and commitment of the resort's leadership and staff towards each other was unexpected but rewarding. I hope my future research projects allow me to experience the same level of collaboration and teamwork. This research project touched on numerous operational issues facing today's service businesses, especially communications, teamwork, and employee-employer engagement. Vyas (2023) explained that engagement is a dual relationship between the employer and employees, and it can serve as an indicator of the positive future performance of the organization.

The participants of this research study were some of the most genuine, dedicated, and respectful service professionals I've worked with in my extensive professional career. The case study findings did not surprise me. I hope other hospitality organizations can discern knowledge from this shared research experience and incorporate it into their operational strategy. In summary, my professional goal aims to continue to grow with future structured research studies based on the foundational findings of this dissertation paper.

Personal and Professional Growth

Reflecting on my undergraduate and MBA studies, I had never considered pursuing and completing a terminal degree in marketing. Since I was employed as an adjunct professor at a Christian university, my initial goal was to procure the required 18 graduate hours to teach marketing courses and gain professional certification. However, I felt that my calling from our Lord was to keep moving ahead, build on my knowledge, and strengthen my faith. Fast forward five years, countless hours of late night and weekend study, canceled plans with family and friends, and many thoughts of "throwing in the towel," I've reached this point of writing the last few pages of this dissertation. I have mixed feelings of guilt that I took precious time away from my family on several occasions and attended several funerals due to COVID-19. The most devastating for me was the death of my three brothers over the last two years. Perhaps in a pertinacious way, I had my study time as my form of therapy to reflect on the good times in my personal and academic life. I'm convinced this five-year journey was not by luck but by the Will of God directing me to share my faith and vast experience with the next generation of business leaders.

Albert Einstein once shared that formulating a problem was a more essential step than finding its solution (Babin, 2019). After nearly five years working on my terminal degree, I concur with Einstein's observation that developing this paper's scope and proposition was more complex than the research for solutions to the problem. As a former healthcare executive with decades of leadership experience, I reflected on my expectations from my prior employees and perhaps now have a more holistic understanding of their expectations of me in those varied leadership roles. Like most career-focused managers, I had the passion and persistence to climb the career ladder and expected those under my supervision to follow the same pathway. The

desire to pursue and attain this terminal degree had similar challenges and struggles as when I reflected on my youth and decided to climb that mysterious career ladder. Perhaps one of the best courses taken during this DBA journey was the class on persistence; it served me well.

From a personal growth perspective, this disciplined journey allowed me to refresh my knowledge of business topics and understand my inner faith and resilience to complete a job. It may have come from my time serving in the U.S. Marine Corps: believe in what you do and finish the job. In this dissertation pathway, I started with one piece of paper and began formulating my topic and ideas, to now finish with almost a book-size paper. I decided to step outside my comfort zone of healthcare knowledge and experience and explore a new industry, hospitality service, for the dissertation setting. Furthermore, I made the correct decision since this research has given me more knowledge from a unique industry perspective.

Biblical Perspective

The Bible is a sacred collection of Christian scriptures from the time of the earth's creation to the death and resurrection of Jesus in the first century A.D. To this day, the Bible is being examined with new archeological findings of missing scriptures and gospels. In this research study, numerous events can relate to many passages within the Bible. The research study revealed the need for management and employees to engage in their work trustfully and respectfully. Proverbs 14:22-23 "You will earn the trust and respect of others if you work for good. If you work for evil, you are making a mistake. Work and you will earn a living: if you sit around talking, you will be poor" (*English Standard Version*, 2016). This verse shows the need for resilient relationships between employees and the employer. Employees are expected to arrive intending to work for the company's goal and that of leadership. Additionally, one must also consider their spiritual work efforts to fulfill God's Will. 1 Corinthians 10:33 says, "Do not

cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the Church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved" (*English Standard Version*, 2016). Relationships in the workplace are established to bring people together to work for the betterment of the business, not just for oneself. Vyas (2023) shared that engagement cannot work in a void; it must work in the presence of relationships. Philippians 2:3: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourself" (*English Standard Version*, 2016).

In the service industry, employees expect their managers to show professionalism and lead by example. The research findings discovered leading by example to be a subtheme when discussing leadership behavior in the workplace. 1 Timothy 4:12: "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (*English Standard Version*, 2016). Employees want to feel valued in the workplace, have the ability and resources to ask questions, and learn daily from their immediate supervisor is germane to a service organization's success. Keller and Alsdorf (2012) stated, "All Christians work with radically different inner motives than those who don't believe, and this can certainly make a difference in the quality, spirit, and honesty with which a believer labors" (p. 185). Not every employee works with the same or similar degree of moral principles and often looks to their manager as a role model. Cheng and Wong (2015) shared that people generally acquire a large part of their behavior practices by observing others in a social setting, such as the work environment, and modifying their behavior patterns through modeling. 1 Philippians 3:17: "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in use" (*English Standard Version*, 2016).

The research findings signified the importance of teamwork and working for the

company's mission. The researcher in this study discovered that (52%) of participants mentioned the importance of teamwork and collaboration with frontline hospitality employees. 1 Peter 4:8-10 says, "Keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace". In the workplace, everyone needs to focus on applying their God-given talents to serve the betterment of others. Being kind to each other and serving graciously are essential skills for teammates, especially in the service industry. According to Keller and Alsdorf (2012), "Just as God equips Christians for building up the Body of Christ, so he also equips all people of talents and gifts for various kinds of work, to build up the human community' (p. 66).

In work, we must be diligent in understanding that people come with different types of talents; however, combining all skills can strengthen the organization's commitment to serve its customers better with respect and understanding. Leadership must take the helm by encouraging employees to work together as a team; we do all we can for the Glory of God. Keller and Alsdorf shared, "We are to see work as a way of service to God and our neighbor, and so we should both choose and conduct our work in accordance with that purpose" (p. 67). Leading by example and practicing daily teamwork initiatives are crucial characteristics of effective leadership behaviors in today's service-oriented businesses. Our Lord teaches us daily to follow His Will and serve him with all our hearts and souls to earn the reward of Eternal Life.

Summary of Reflections

In summary, the reflections of the research study are multi-dimensional as they synthesize many years of employment by the researcher within the service industry (healthcare), whereby he needed to focus his daily practices on the concepts of faith, trust, commitment,

respect, and teamwork in his daily duties. In service-related organizations, the pulse of a business is palpable by the customer's trust, commitment, and loyalty. The reflective framework outlined in this qualitative study helped to develop a more blended but defined pathway of how customer loyalty is foundational to achieving and sustaining competitive positioning in any service business, such as in the South Florida hospitality industry. Through the eyes of the researcher, there needed to be a sufficient and reliable level of qualitative research devoted to pulling together all of the proposed concepts into a singular pathway for service organizations, such as the diverse hospitality industry. Finally, the researcher believed he was blessed by the Heavenly Father to lead him down this academic journey later in his life and to now share his newly found knowledge with his students while serving the Will of God.

Summary of Section 3

In summary, Section 3 focused on multiple data findings in the case study, the discovery of five new themes and two new subthemes, and the review of results with previous literature review studies. In addition, the researcher confirmed the existence of his three anticipated themes and the proposition of the findings on the problem statement. The researcher chose a leading South Florida hospitality resort property with a notably low employee attrition rate and a superior ranking on the Forbes five-star list for hospitality practices. The twenty-nine study participants of the premier resort met the minimum qualifications, and all participants were employed with the facility for at least one year of direct guest services. Each participant was asked eight semi-structured questions about their job experiences or previous hospitality experiences while employed at the resort. Furthermore, the researcher was able to conclude through his findings a pathway from leadership behaviors to including all of the five constructs needed to develop an effective pathway to customer loyalty and competitive advantage.

Summary 3 and Study Conclusion

Participant primary data was downloaded into MAXQDA software, and as a result of this case study, five themes and two subthemes were discovered beyond the original three anticipated themes noted in Section 1. The following five new critical themes were found: 1) ensuring proper training, 2) teamwork, 3) leadership engagement with staff, 4) delivering high-quality services, and 5) developing and maintaining a caring organizational culture. As previously mentioned in Section 1, the specific problem that was addressed was the potential inability of South Florida service industry leaders to gain customer loyalty, resulting in the possible loss of competitive advantage. Through this case study, the researcher discovered that hospitality leadership needs to ensure employees are engaged with their jobs. These behavioral actions help diminish employee attrition and develop a more robust organizational culture of employer-employee commitment (Figure 1). Furthermore, this case study proved to fill the gaps in research knowledge on remodeling an effective pathway to customer loyalty for a competitive advantage.

The reflections of the research study were consolidated based on prior experiences of the researcher's personal opinions, observations gleaned for this case study, and first-hand work experiences within the healthcare (service) industry. In service-related organizations, the customer's trust, commitment, and loyalty demonstrate the pulse of any successful business. The reflective framework summarized in this qualitative case study helped to develop a more unified but demarcated pathway of how customer loyalty is fundamental to achieving and sustaining competitive strategy in any service business. The researcher concluded that there needed to be a sufficient and reliable level of qualitative research dedicated to consolidating the proposed study concepts into a singular pathway for service organizations.

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Appendix A: Approval Request

Date

Dear (Mr/Ms. Leadership),

As a doctoral candidate in the Liberty University School of Business, I am conducting research as part of the dissertation requirements for a doctoral degree (DBA) in business administration. The title of my research project is *Redesigning an Effective Pathway to Consumer Loyalty for Sustainable Competitive Advantage*. The scope of my research is aimed at the hospitality service industry in the South Florida market. My research seeks to address the effects of leadership behaviors on frontline managers and non-managerial staff towards their work environment in the hospitality industry, leading to achieving customer loyalty and sustaining competitive advantage.

I am requesting a personal meeting to discuss this research opportunity with you in more detail. During the meeting, I will be able to share more information on participant qualifications and details of the questions. The typical interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes, and participation will be entirely voluntary. Participants are welcome to discontinue their participation at any time. In addition, each participant will be presented with an informed consent form before participation that details the study and how their information will be kept confidential.

If you choose to meet to discuss this academic research study in more detail, please feel free to respond by email to ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

I appreciate your consideration of my request.

Sincerely,

Stephen P. Panczak, Sr.
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University School of Business

IRB-FY22-23-770

Appendix B: Letter of Invitation

Date

Name
Address

Dear xxxx,

As a doctoral candidate at Liberty University School of Business, I am conducting research as part of the dissertation requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is *Redesigning an Effective Pathway to Consumer Loyalty for Sustainable Competitive Advantage*. The scope of my research is aimed at the hospitality service industry in the South Florida market. My research seeks to address the effects of leadership behaviors on frontline managers and non-managerial staff towards their work environment in the hospitality industry, leading to achieving customer loyalty and sustaining competitive advantage.

Qualifications for this study are as follows: participants must be at least 18 years old or older, be actively employed with the company for at least one year, and have a company position with direct face-to-face customer interaction (3 years customer interaction for frontline managers).

To participate or for more information, please feel free to contact me at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or email me at ███████████████

When the interview is scheduled, your name and position will be collected. Upon scheduling and more details on my research, a consent form will be emailed to you. The consent form must be signed and emailed to me at the email address below. I will also sign, and a fully signed copy will be returned to you in person before the start of the interview. Your information will not be shared with the employer; it will be confidential. All electronic documentation will be held in a password-protected file, and all hard copy documentation will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for three years, as required by the university protocol. The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes.

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. No fee will be paid by the interviewer or to the interviewee to participate in this study. You may decline as an interviewee or withdraw from participation at any time without consequences or retribution.

Sincerely,

Stephen P. Panczak, Sr.
Doctoral Candidate
(xxx) xxx-xxxx
spanczak@liberty.edu   **IRB-FY22-23-770**

Appendix C: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Redesigning an Effective Pathway to Consumer Loyalty for Sustainable Competitive Advantage.
Principal Investigator: Stephen P. Panczak, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study about the effects of leadership interactions and daily behaviors toward employees to promote customer loyalty in hospitality industry firms. To participate, you must be 18 years old or older and a current employee with at least one year of direct, face-to-face interaction with hospitality customers in South Florida. Frontline managers will need to have at least two years of direct, face-to-face interaction with hospitality customers.

Taking part in this research project is strictly voluntary.

Please read this consent form and ask questions before deciding whether to participate in this research project.

What is the purpose of the study, and why is it being done?

This research examines how leadership behaviors can impact employees' actions in the hospitality workplace. Furthermore, the study looks to find behavior trends that will inspire employees to promote customer loyalty in service industry businesses related to their performance outcomes to maintain competitive advantage within their markets.

What can I expect if I take part in this study?

If you agree to be part of this study, I will ask you to do the following.

- Participate in a face-to-face interview consisting of five standard questions, with the possibility of additional follow-up questions. The interview process will be recorded via audio for later review by the researcher. The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, each participant selected in this study will be given pseudonyms.
- Review the interview transcript for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect a direct benefit from participating in this study. In addition, please be advised that there is no immediate payment for participation in this study.
The primary benefits of this research will assist hospitality businesses in the South Florida market to improve their employees' attitudes towards customer loyalty and how loyal customers impact long-term competitiveness.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study include minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue, stress, and becoming upset. Participating in this study does not pose a risk to your safety or well-being. Another risk associated with this study is the potential fear of providing a personal opinion, which could lead to uneasy feelings from previous experiences.

The researcher will advise the participant to skip the question to mitigate this risk.

How will personal information be protected?

All records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher can access the documents. The researcher will not use your personal information outside of this research project.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using codes: your name, position, or any identifiable information will not be included in the final study report.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Participation will not affect your current or future relationships with the researcher or Liberty University. If needed, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting these relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, don't hesitate to contact the researcher at the email address/phone number in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Stephen Panczak. You may ask any questions you have before the start of the interview. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at (561) xxx-xxxx or spanczak@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Lorna DeShay, Ph.D., ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, whom do you contact?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515, or email at irb@liberty.edu

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) ensures that human subjects research will be conducted ethically as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Signature for Consent

By signing this document, you agree to participate in this research study. Make sure you fully understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy of the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study. The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

☐   The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Print Subject Name

_____
Signature

_____
Date Signed

Researcher's Acknowledgement:

_____
Researcher's Signature

_____
Date Signed

IRB-FY22-23-770

Appendix D: Interview Guide

First and foremost, I would like to thank you for your time and participation in being part of this research study. The title of this research study is *Redesigning an Effective Pathway to Consumer Loyalty for Sustainable Competitive Advantage*. This research examines how leadership behaviors can impact employees' actions in the hospitality workplace. Furthermore, the investigative research looks to find behavior trends that will inspire employees to promote customer loyalty in service industry businesses related to their performance outcomes to maintain competitive advantage within their markets. The hospitality industry in South Florida spends millions of dollars per year on how leaders can improve employee engagement with customers to improve loyalty and gain competitiveness in their markets.

The typical interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes, and participation will be entirely voluntary. As a participant, you are welcome to discontinue your participation at any time. In addition, each participant will be presented with an informed consent form before participation that details the study and how your information will be kept confidential. If you have any further questions, please feel free to email spanczak@liberty.edu.

Main Interview

As the researcher, I have designed eight main questions with the potential of several follow-up questions. Please know you can review your interview transcripts to check for accuracy and change if needed.

No information will not be shared with your employer under any condition.

Question 1: What steps can hospitality managers take with their staff employees to help promote loyalty and repeat business with their customers?

The researcher may ask several follow-up questions to identify the participant's level of

perception of the leadership culture and how it affects the working conditions of the business.

Question 2: What negative actions or behaviors do hospitality managers practice that could fail to promote customer loyalty?

Several follow-up questions may be asked to focus on the participant's first-hand knowledge of

leadership actions or behaviors that may fail to promote customer loyalty.

Question 3: What positive actions can hospitality leaders practice that can help to promote customer loyalty?

Several follow-up questions may be asked to focus on the participant's first-hand knowledge of

leadership actions or behaviors that may help to promote customer loyalty.

The dual emphasis of these last two questions will approach how leaders and frontline service

employees view the essential steps needed to maintain customer loyalty and determine the

common elements that will help promote competitive advantage.

Question 4: How important are proper employee training and ongoing empowerment to improve customer loyalty?

Follow-up questions may help to identify the participant's understanding of leadership

expectations and actions to help promote customer loyalty.

FOR FRONTLINE MANAGERS: The researcher may ask for an example of training or discussions of how you promote and encourage customer loyalty with your employees.

> **Question 5: How important is it for hospitality managers to promote and discuss the need for a top level of service to customers?**

Follow-up questions may help to identify the participant's understanding of leadership expectations and actions to help promote customer loyalty.

> **Question 6: Explain why trust and effective communication are so important for hospitality employees.**

Follow-up questions may help to identify the participant's understanding of leadership expectations and actions to help promote customer loyalty.

> **Question 7: How important is it for hospitality managers to communicate the purpose of maintaining competitiveness to their employees?**

The researcher may ask follow-up questions to gain insight into the participant's understanding and perception of their role and how it leads to sustaining competitive advantage.

> **Question 8: What are some important issues hospitality managers must communicate to their employees regularly?**

Researchers must understand how customer satisfaction topics can be transformed into long-term loyalty in a constructive process to improve competitive positioning in the market.

> # Questions for Frontline Managers Only

FOR FRONTLINE MANAGERS: The researcher will ask for examples of how you communicate and encourage customer loyalty with your employees.

> **Question 9: As a frontline manager, how often do you communicate with your employees on issues of customer satisfaction?**

> **Question 10: As a frontline manager, what are the challenges you face with communication, collaboration, and trust?**

Summary Statement

This will conclude the interview process. Do you have any additional questions at this time? Your information will not be shared with the employer; it will be confidential. All electronic documentation will be held in a password-protected file, and all hard copy documentation will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for three years, as required by the university protocol.

Thank you for your time and participation in this exciting research project.

Stephen Panczak, Doctoral Candidate

IRB-FY22-23-770

Appendix E: IRB Approval Letter

[External] IRB-FY22-23-770 - Initial: Initial - Exempt

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>
Tue 5/2/2023 11:48 AM
To: DeShay, Loma S (School of Business) <ldeshay@liberty.edu> Panczak, Stephen <sscanczak@liberty.edu>

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content]

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 2, 2023

Stephen Panczak
Loma DeShay

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-770 Redesigning an Effective Pathway to Consumer Loyalty for Sustainable Competitive Advantage

Dear Stephen Panczak, Loma DeShay,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46.104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met.
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office