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How Managers of Nonfranchised Restaurants Use Training to Improve Customer Satisfaction

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Abstract

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MBA, Columbia Southern University, 2014

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Customer satisfaction is a factor that significantly influences profits and overall business success. Understanding the dynamics of customer satisfaction and its relationship to profits, job security, and the overall customer experience is critical for restaurant managers. Grounded in the service quality theory, the purpose of this multiple case study was to explore strategies nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction. The participants comprised five nonfranchised restaurant managers in central Delaware who successfully improved customer satisfaction. Data were collected from semistructured interviews and research notes, then analyzed using content analysis. Four themes emerged: continuous on-the-job training, manager observations and customer feedback, flexible training strategies, and hiring and enforcement strategies. A key recommendation includes managers conducting on-the-job training rather than formal and time-limited training. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve the perceived self-worth and self-dignity of employees through training, individual development, expanded employment opportunities, and tax revenue for the local community.

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this research to my family and friends, who continued to motivate me throughout this entire process. My Wife, Latesha Graves, was my inspiration. She was equally committed and dedicated to my educational endeavors and was more than a partner. When it became a challenge to manage work and research, she was there to ease my stress by taking most of our family responsibilities to ensure I had extra time to produce a high-quality study. Latesha and I have been married for over 20 years, and I am always amazed at the daily sacrifices she makes for our family. I love you! To my twin boys, Jasiah and Jayden, thank you for being so patient and understanding the purpose of the long days and night I spent at the computer. The reason I stayed so focused and dedicated to this research was for both of you. I wanted to be an example for my sons of what grit, combined with hard work, can get you. Sons, no more late nights; you two have won a lifetime of daddy reading bedtime stories and hours of fun outside. Well, maybe until the age of eighteen. I am looking forward to the next ten years to make up for all the fun times we have lost. Thank you for always being proud of me and challenging me to go for that next goal to my mom, dad, and sisters. Your prayers and encouragement helped guide me to this accomplishment. It meant a lot to me that my close friends always asked about my progress. Just asking about my progress motivated me to push through life's challenges, which played a vital role in me reaching this accomplishment. Thank you to anyone that I may have missed. I am eternally grateful for having your support during my journey.

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Thank you, God, for giving me the strength and will to complete this journey. Without you, I am lost. God is good! I thank my Committee Chair, Dr. Timothy Malone, for his patience and guidance. Without those phone calls and multiple emails, I would not be at this stage of my research. Thank you to my second committee member (SCM), Dr. Scott Hipsher, for his time and suggestions towards strengthening my research. I would also like to thank my university research reviewer (URR), Dr. Brenda Jack, for being patient. I encountered multiple computer and internet issues due to my military lifestyle, which involved me being out of the country. However, both Dr. Malone and Dr. Jack were understanding and helped me overcome those obstacles. Thank you. Additionally, thank you to Dr. Banasik and staff who helped bridge gaps and ensured that I had the required tools to be successful. I am so grateful to be part of the Walden establishment. Their dedication and attention to detail were vital for me completing my research.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Customer satisfaction is a vital component that separates high-performing businesses from those with marginal to poor performance (Zhou, 2019). Customer satisfaction is a topic that managers continually research across multiple industries. The correlation between customer satisfaction and company profits has driven various types of research within this area and should be a talking point for customer-centric companies. In addition to profits, the cost of selling (COS) is also affected by customer satisfaction. Lim et al. (2019) concluded that high customer satisfaction would benefit the company's COS and therefore decrease recruitment cost. Although COS and profits are essential in the restaurant industry, customer satisfaction plays a critical role in longevity.

Unlike chain restaurants, nonfranchise restaurants lack support. Not having franchise support is a challenge that plagues nonfranchise restaurants and makes it difficult for them to obtain growth and high customer retention (Chen, 2018). To mitigate this potential issue, nonfranchise restaurants are focusing more on a holistic approach towards enhancing customer satisfaction through customer service training, which can increase retention and business growth (Lau et al., 2019). In this study, I sought to understand and identify how customer service training positively influences customer satisfaction.

Background of the Problem

To establish the foundation of this study, a mutual understanding of customer service, customer service training, and customer satisfaction is required. These three components are often thought to be interchangeable and may provide additional guidance on analyzing the final results of this present study.

Customer service often plays a vital role in improving a company's profits. The increase in profits results from reducing per customer acquisition cost, increasing customer retention, and providing additional growth opportunities (Terziev et al., 2017). Based on intensive research concerning customer satisfaction and retention, customer service could provide an intrinsic value that all companies should recognize. A 2017 study published by American Express (2017) indicated that United States consumers are more willing to spend 17% more with businesses that provide excellent customer service.

In 2016, companies were spending an average of $1,273 per employee on training (Clark, 2019). Up from $1,000 when Clark completed his 2009 study, some managers still fail to realize the importance and impact of employee training on a company's performance. In some industries, when asked what return a company receives from proper customer service training, many managers are naïve and struggle to give a response (Clark, 2019). This study sought to bridge that gap and provide research-based evidence of how customer service training correlates with enhancing profits. An effective customer service training program will mediate the relationship between service orientation and employee engagement (Johnson et al., 2018). The benefit of this paradigm will result in customers obtaining exceptional customer service during their visit. If those customers share their experience with others, they will become repeat customers and encourage others to visit and provide growth.

Customer satisfaction is the overall evaluation of product performance or customer service (Johnson & Fornell, 1991). Consumers are continually evaluating the entire purchase process, including the initial contact, product purchase, and after-purchase actions. In a study of customer satisfaction, Oliver (1999) found a significant correlation between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction is an integral part of retention, so establishing a relationship with the client is essential. Relationships with clients allow companies to follow customers through the buying process to ensure satisfaction. Bolton (1998) studied consumers in the cellular phone industry and determined high customer satisfaction positively affects retention; Lemon et al. (2002) performed research in the telecommunications industry and reported the same outcome. Thus, all industry leaders can assume that customer satisfaction will have a positive impact on customer retention. A company's failure to provide excellent customer service may have an irreversible impact on customer satisfaction. The background of the problem has been provided, and the focus will now shift to the problem statement.

Problem Statement

Organizational leaders lose millions of dollars annually because of low customer satisfaction (Ortman, 2017). Company profits could increase by 224% if organizational leaders focus more on improving customer satisfaction (Sorescu & Sorescu, 2016). The general business problem is that some business managers lack strategies to improve customer satisfaction training. The specific business problem that I addressed in this study is that some nonfranchised restaurant managers lack strategies to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training.

Purpose Statement

My purpose in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. The targeted population consisted of five nonfranchised restaurant managers located in central Delaware who have improved customer satisfaction through effective training. The criterions used to determine which nonfranchised restaurant would best answer the present research question is business longevity of 5 years or more and successfully improved customer satisfaction through training. The implications for social change include improving the quality of services provided to nonfranchised restaurant customers, improving the perceived self-worth and self-dignity of employees through training, individual development, and expanded employment opportunities and tax revenue for the local community.

Nature of the Study

A roadmap toward soliciting in-depth individual experiences and perceptions of participants is through qualitative research. Qualitative research was appropriate for this study because it involved exploring training strategies employed by three business managers of nonfranchised restaurants to enhance customer satisfaction. Information from quantitative research is aggregated by a measurement instrument, transcribed into a numeric format, and then analyzed to develop the final results (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Researchers cannot explore business strategies in an unstructured way if they use a quantitative research method, which is why this method was deemed unsuitable for this present study. Mixed method research involves using elements from both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore complex phenomena in detail with the intent to solve a problem (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). As the need to answer the primary research question through statistical measurement is not warranted, it confirms mixed methods research would not have been suitable for this study. Qualitative research includes an in-depth focus on gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that may reveal unknown social facts (Silverman, 2018). Embedded within qualitative research is a set of interpretive material practices that facilitate the understanding of a phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). Therefore, qualitative research is the best method for exploring nonfranchised restaurant managers' strategies to train employees for improved customer satisfaction.

Researchers can use one of four qualitative designs to collect data and to help guide the flow of research. The phenomenology design is used to seek information concerning a group's everyday experiences or an individual (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology design is not suitable for this present study because the requirement is to identify strategies and not the lived experiences of participants. Narrative research involves studying individuals' lives by asking them to provide stories about their lives (Clandinin, 2013). In this research, I identified and studied training strategies and not about the lives of participants. Thus, I did not select the narrative design. Ethnography design involves gathering and understanding participants' subjective experiences along with learning about the broad culture-sharing behavior of individuals or groups (Lahlou et al., 2015).

I considered ethnography design, but it would have restricted the study to exploring or investigating behaviors rather than business practices. Therefore, I did not choose the ethnography design. A multiple case study design includes flexibility to explore a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in depth (Di Mauro et al., 2018). A multiple case study appears to be the best method based on the following conditions: the type of research question, researcher control over actual behavioral events, and the degree of focus on contemporary events (Yin, 2018). For this present study, I sought no control over behavioral events, and I developed the research question to understand *how* a phenomenon works. Finally, my focus in this present study was contemporary events. Based on all four designs, multiple case study design is most suited for answering the present research question. Thus, the research design will be multiple case study.

Research Question

What strategies do nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training?

Interview Questions

1. Which training topics have proven to be effective in enhancing customer satisfaction?
2. How do you measure the effects of training to improve customer satisfaction?
3. What were the key issues employees were most interested in while being trained to improve customer satisfaction?

4. What training methods have you used to help employees improve customer satisfaction?
5. What may be an indication that a change in customer satisfaction training is necessary?
6. What type of continuous training programs do you use to maintain employees' training towards facilitating customer satisfaction improvement?
7. What challenges have occurred while training employees on strategies to improve customer satisfaction?
8. What barriers made it difficult to ensure employees follow training guidelines presented during training?
9. How do you address new issues that you may not have covered in initial employee training of strategies used to improve customer satisfaction?
10. What other comments would you like to share regarding the strategies used to train employees that resulted in improved customer satisfaction?

Conceptual Framework

As a guide in research study, the conceptual framework will be the researcher's map (Silverman, 2018). Researchers have used a conceptual framework to focus and bound a study regarding whom and what they will and will not study (Rudestam & Newton, 2015). I used Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) service quality theory (SERVQUAL) to better understand strategies towards enhancing customer satisfaction. Oliver (1980) described *customer satisfaction* is the difference between the level of service a customer received compared to the perceived level of service. Determining the level of service a customer received compared to the perceived level of service can best be measured using SERVQUAL. SERVQUAL allows business leaders to establish a baseline used to measure future changes toward improving customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The overall objective of using SERVQUAL is to ensure any new strategies applied to improved customer satisfaction are effective.

SERVQUAL is the theory of measuring the effectiveness of strategies. There are multiple models of measurement researchers could use when using SERVQUAL. Three-component model of Rust and Oliver (1994) has been adopted within this present study with SERVQUAL being the foundation. The three-component model involves reviewing the service product, delivery, and environment to determine service quality (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Because my research objective is to seek strategies used to improve customer satisfaction, the three-component model was suitable as a template for analyzing and categorizing participants' responses to determine the quality of services provided.

Operational Definitions

Customer satisfaction: Customer satisfaction is a consumer attribute that generates confidence in the company offering the product or service (Bricci et al., 2016).

SERVQUAL: SERVQUAL is a model developed by Parasuraman et al. to measure service quality across industries for the last four decades (Hasan et al., 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

I assumed the selection of nonfranchised restaurant managers as the study population would lead to better insights into which strategy could improve customer satisfaction through staff training. Assumptions of this type are known as epistemological assumptions, in which the researcher tries to come as close as possible to participants of the study to understand their individual views (Creswell, 2013). The first assumption was I, as the researcher and the main instrument of the study, was competent to perform all critical components of the research. Another assumption was that all participants' responses would be honest and accurate.

Limitations

Limitations are situations out of the researcher's control and create weaknesses within the study (Simon, 2011). Given that the study focused only on nonfranchise managers in a geographic area, the results cannot be generalized.

The second limitation of the study pertains to the capabilities of the researcher in conducting semistructured interviews. To offset this limitation and enhance the quality of the data, the researcher read scholarly articles on research-based instructions for conducting interviews. The final limitation of the study was the lack of honesty from participants, possibly confounding the results of the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries or limits set by researchers to limit the scope of the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The first delimitation was the geographical location; all participants are from businesses within central Delaware. The second delimitation was the industry. I studied only the restaurant industry. More specifically, I studied only nonfranchise restaurant managers to identify strategies used to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training. The final delimitation is the sample size. Small sample sizes are used in qualitative studies to understand intricate details and to provide rich data to researchers and readers (Roy et al., 2015).

Significance of the Study

The significance of a study indicated why the study is critical and whom it matters to (Foss & Waters, 2016). The findings of the study may add value to the business through contribution to effective business practices and expanding scholarly literature on SERVQUAL. The restaurant industry is a competitive industry that requires managers to react quickly to common concerns in a dynamic environment (Gao et al., 2018). Equally important is how well managers implement strategies to retain customers (Jalilvand et al., 2017).

In a highly competitive business environment, the loss of customers represents more than just the loss of the next sale (Alshurideh, 2016). Maintaining the ability to keep customers happy might result in high customer satisfaction and drastically decrease a company’s customer acquisition costs (Min et al., 2016). Alshurideh (2016) revealed that new customers are expensive to find and reach; they buy 10% fewer products than existing customers and are less engaged in the buying process compared to existing customers. One method used to facilitate low customer acquisition costs is successful customer satisfaction strategies (Qin & Prybutok, 2009). The findings of this study might contribute to positive social change and improvement of business practices resulting from additional training strategies for the enhancement of customer satisfaction.

Contribution to Business Practice

There is little existing information concerning strategies nonfranchised restaurant managers have used to train employees to improve customer satisfaction. Procedures used to retain customers are critical, as the loss of customers in many industries represents a decrease in income and reduced profits (Itzkowitz, 2013). When customer retention increases by 5%, a restaurant's profits can increase by 25% (Pettijohn et al., 1997). Customer retention is directly related to strategies used by employees to attain a high level of customer satisfaction (Murali et al., 2016). Results from this study may lead to new employee training strategies for improving customer satisfaction by nonfranchised restaurant managers. Providing employees with tools to enhance customer satisfaction may lead to a long-term return in the form of retained customers (Sorescu & Sorescu, 2016).

Implications for Social Change

The improved ability to train employees to enhance customer satisfaction may increase the self-worth, self-dignity, and professional development of nonfranchised restaurant managers. The self-worth and self-dignity of restaurant employees may be improved through improved capabilities to provide greater customer satisfaction. The local community may benefit from improved customer satisfaction in three ways: (a) through expanded employment opportunities, (b) increasing monetary support achieved through employed taxpayers, and (c) more positive dining experiences.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

My purpose in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies nonfranchised managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training. The literature review provided a comprehensive review of research-based articles and theories concerning customer satisfaction through SERVQUAL, customer service, and employee training. Improving the service quality of businesses can benefit their customer satisfaction and for the business in general (Carranza et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017). Service quality, which is the difference between customers' expectations and their perceptions of the actual services received (Parasuraman et al., 1988), has been found to influence customer loyalty, returnability, and word of mouth (Kasiri et al., 2017; Liu & Lee, 2016; Liu et al., 2017). If customers deem a business's services to be of high quality, they will likely be satisfied with their transactions, which then increases the chances they will repurchase services from the same provider again in the future and even recommend the provider to others. Service quality has been considered a major factor in different industries since its conception (Josiam et al., 2017a). The value of service quality in businesses is something business leaders and managers should attend to when planning their strategies and employee training.

Transactions within the restaurant industry commonly involve services from employees. From the host or hostess who receives diners to the chefs who prepare the food, employees in this industry perform different services. Service quality is then an integral factor in this industry. Furthermore, the evolution of this industry has led to even more sophisticated services (Cheng et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016). Cheng et al. (2018)

purported, at the peak of economic development, public consumption shifts from necessity to luxury, seeking higher-order pleasures from services. Food industry customers are no longer solely interested in the food itself but also the overall experience of dining out (Lee et al., 2016). This evolution has made the food industry highly competitive in providing innovative and enhanced services (Gao et al., 2018). Restaurant leaders and managers need to elevate their services to provide pleasurable experiences to their customers and keep up with this competitive field. As this study explored ways to improve customer satisfaction within the restaurant setting or the food industry, this literature review was revolved around service quality, specifically in the restaurant setting, and its influence on customer satisfaction as well as other benefits for business.

For this literature review, I utilized the following online databases: ResearchGate, SpringerLink, EBSCOhost, SAGE journals, Emerald Insight, Elsevier, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar. I used the following search terms individually and in combination within these databases: *restaurant, restaurant industry, food industry, restaurant setting, service quality, SERVQUAL, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, behavioral intention, restaurant employee training, training strategies,* and *business strategies*. A total of 80 sources are included in this review, including 71 (88.75% of the total sources) peer-reviewed journal articles from the year 2016 onwards. Table 1 presents a summary of the sources utilized in this review.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of Study Sources

Resources	(2016-present)	% from total	Seminal	Total
Books	0		1	1
Book chapters	4	5%	0	4
Peer-reviewed articles	71	88.75%	3	74
Theses	1	1.25%	0	1
Total	76	95%	4	80

Service Quality Theory

The service quality theory (SERVQUAL) by Parasuraman et al. (1988) serves as one of the theoretical frameworks for the present study. SERVQUAL focuses on customers' overall perception regarding a business or a brand (Parasuraman et al., 1988). To date, it is the most utilized scale for measuring service quality in general (Josiam et al., 2017). Proponents of SERVQUAL support the notion that service quality is the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of actual performance and that this gap represents the factors businesses need to improve upon (Parasuraman et al., 1988). As per the SERVQUAL, service quality is highly related but not exactly similar to customer satisfaction (Parasuraman et al., 1988). As the present study sought to explore restaurant management strategies that improve customer satisfaction, the SERVQUAL aids in the understanding of concepts, relationships, and ideas behind service quality and its influence on customer satisfaction.

The relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction consists of similarities and differences. Although service quality is the enduring overall perception of customers, customer satisfaction depends on specific situations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). A customer who holds a high perception of service quality for a certain business may have a single negative experience with that business, which may leave him or her unsatisfied. In other words, that customer may hold a high service quality for that business but still hold low customer satisfaction for the same business based on a specific transaction. The opposite may be true as well, as some customers may have specific pleasant experiences with a certain business but still hold low a service quality for that same business overall. However, service quality may develop from several customer satisfaction incidents over time (Pai et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Customers who continuously experience satisfaction with a business will eventually hold a high service quality for that business. Conversely, service quality also influences customer satisfaction (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Diab et al., 2016; Rana et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018), thus improving the service quality of a business may also lead to higher customer satisfaction. Business leaders and managers should then note the complementary nature of these two concepts.

Leaders and managers who seek to improve their business may draw upon this relationship to optimize customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is a vital factor in a business's success and survivability (Pizam et al., 2016). Consistently satisfied customers will establish loyalty towards the business and increase repeated purchase intentions and positive word-of-mouth (Bujisic et al., 2018; Diab et al., 2016; Rana et al., 2017). To draw upon these benefits, leaders and managers may use the SERVQUAL as a basis for evaluating what dimensions they need to improve upon. Initially, Parasuraman et al. (1988) developed the SERVQUAL to include 10 service quality dimensions, which included tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing the customer, and access. Later on, I reduced these dimensions to five total, including tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Bhuian, 2016; Liu & Lee, 2016; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019). These dimensions served as the criteria business owners should take note of when seeking to improve their businesses.

Each dimension in SERVQUAL pertains to a component or group of components within a business. Tangibility refers to physical objects and spaces of the business such as facilities, equipment, materials, area, prices of the actual products, and employee appearance (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017). Reliability measures the professionalism, dependability, correctness of information provided, and accuracy of the employees and the service providers in general. Responsiveness refers to employees and service providers' willingness to aid customers, respond to customers' needs, and provide swift and efficient services. Assurance involves the trust and confidence gained by serving customers with knowledge and courtesy, as well as safety. Empathy is the level of caring and individualized service given to customers (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017). Each of these dimensions is also subject to customers' expectations and actual perceptions, which would then establish the business's service quality.

Many studies have utilized SERVQUAL and its dimensions concerning different types of businesses in the past. Josiam et al. (2017) cited the SERVQUAL as the most widely used scale for service quality in the field of business and enterprise. For example, Liu and Lee (2016) explored the influence of service quality and the mediating effects of pricing on airlines' word-of-mouth and revisit intentions, using the SERVQUAL. Their finding indicated passengers rated airlines with high-service quality if the services they received had met their expectations (Liu & Lee, 2016). Word-of-mouth also appeared to increase with service quality (Liu & Lee, 2016). In Bhuian's (2016) study, the SERVQUAL was utilized to measure students' perceived service quality of branch campuses in Qatar. Students ranked all five dimensions within SERVQUAL as below their expectations, showing poor service quality. This study then revealed how the branch campuses' investments may be poorly spent, engendering low service quality and low enrollment rates (Bhuian, 2016). These studies not only supported the SERVQUAL's conceptualization of service quality as the gap between expectations and perceived performance but also supported its utility in explaining business results.

The advantages of SERVQUAL may lie in the compendiousness of its dimensions. Studies have relied on the SERVQUAL to thoroughly examine different types of businesses and how their services could be improved. Marathe (2017), for one, used the SERVQUAL to establish several recommendations for private banking based on each dimension. Private banks appeared to excel in their physical facilities (tangibility) and prompt response to customers' needs (responsiveness), leading to high customer satisfaction (Marathe, 2017). In the insurance industry, Kumar et al. (2018) found the dimensions of SERVQUAL to adequately measure the service quality perceptions of customers. They found all five dimensions were important to customers of different ages, occupations, insurance policy types, and residential statuses (Kumar et al., 2018). Generally, reliability and responsiveness appeared to be the most vital dimensions for customers in the insurance industry (Kumar et al., 2018). These studies then showed how the different dimensions of SERVQUAL could be utilized to show customers' priorities and how businesses could best meet these priorities and increase their service quality.

The food industry has also utilized SERVQUAL in various studies. Josiam et al. (2017) used the SERVQUAL to investigate a student-run restaurant in the United States. Results from their study showed that customers were generally satisfied with the restaurant in terms of all dimensions of the SERVQUAL. However, they encountered barriers to tangibility, such as convenience, payment methods, and parking (Josiam et al., 2017). Lee et al. (2016) found similar results in their study on fine-dining restaurants in Southern California. Although their study focused solely on tangibility, they also noted that vehicle convenience or parking was a major factor in customer satisfaction, along with table aesthetics and hygiene purity (Lee et al., 2016). They emphasized parking as a tangible attribute, noting how it represented the first thing customers experienced before entering the restaurant. Easy access to parking spaces and even valet services are then crucial in the restaurant business as it serves as a precursor for their dining experience (Lee et al., 2016). These studies reveal the utility of SERVQUAL in discovering which attributes are important for customer satisfaction and what is currently lacking in restaurant services.

Despite its prominence in the literature, the SERVQUAL has also been subject to criticism in the past. The main criticism of the SERVQUAL concerns its universality across different contexts (Kar, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018; Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). As different industries and sectors have utilized the SERVQUAL, the values of the dimensions differ for each of them (Kar, 2016). The SERVQUAL does not include any indicators for the food industry specifically (Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). Researchers have tried to resolve this issue by developing industry-specific versions of the SERVQUAL. For the food industry, the DINESERV scale was developed using the same dimensions as SERVQUAL (Adeinat, 2019; Arroyo-Lopez et al., 2016; Kuo et al., 2018; Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). The DINESERV, also used in several studies concerning the food industry, appears to place more value in the tangibility dimension of service quality (Nguyen et al., 2018). These nuances may be important for quantitative studies that use these scales to strictly measure the service quality variable. In the present study's case, the main theory behind SERVQUAL, which the DINESERV is based on, would suffice to provide a framework for the qualitative investigation.

The DINESERV, although developed to adapt to the food industry, has not escaped criticism from previous research. Tripathi and Dave (2017a) noted the DINESERV, similar to the SERVQUAL, had problems regarding its universality. Although the DINESERV specifically focuses on the food industry, it does not consider cultural differences and the passage of time that may both influence customers' expectations and perceptions (Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). Adeinat (2019) also noted that although businesses may share similar service qualities as per the DINESERV, they may differ in efficiency. Certain nuances in the market may indeed influence the reliability and validity of both SERVQUAL and DINESERV; however, Zakariah et al. (2016) argued this is normal for most models, as the market is a complex realm wherein a single model could not possibly be entirely universal. Researchers should just be mindful of the nuances in the market when applying models such as DINESERV and SERVQUAL.

Another criticism for SERVQUAL lies in its focus. SERVQUAL mainly focuses on functional quality or process of service delivery over technical quality or outcomes (Mujinga, 2019). This focus may make it less applicable to businesses that are more reliant on their goods rather than services (Mujinga, 2019). For such businesses, customer satisfaction may be based on their actual products, rather than the process by which it is delivered. Past researchers have also questioned the value of SERVQUAL's dimensions, with some considering the SERVQUAL as a unidimensional construct or modifying its existing dimensions (Ocampo et al., 2017; Park et al., 2018). Despite these criticisms, SERVQUAL remains the luminary model in service quality research (Mujinga, 2019). The present study utilized the SERVQUAL in conjunction with another model as it explores restaurant strategies for improving customer satisfaction through service quality.

Three-Component Model

The other model that serves as a framework for the present study is the three-component model of service quality developed by Rust and Oliver (1994). Rust and Oliver (1994) based this model on another traditional theory, most commonly known as the Nordic perspective (Marchiori et al., 2017). Like the SERVQUAL, the Nordic perspective considers service quality to be the difference between customers' expectations and the actual services they received (Khader & Madhavi, 2017). Proponents of the Nordic perspective purport that service quality is based upon two dimensions: the technical quality or the actual outcome of the service provided, and functional quality or the customers' perception of how the service was provided (Khader & Madhavi, 2017; Marchiori et al., 2017). Technical quality is concerned with the "what" of service quality and functional quality is concerned with the "how of service quality (Khader & Madhavi, 2017; Loyyl & Kumar, 2018). The Nordic perspective is most considered as the European counterpart of the American SERVQUAL model (Sharma & Berad, 2019). As a predominant theory in the service industry, the Nordic perspective served as a foundation for several subsequent models.

The three-component model was one of such theories established from the Nordic perspective. Rust and Oliver (1994) agreed with the Nordic perspective's two technical and functional quality dimensions. In the three-component model, technical quality is synonymous with service product or outcome, whereas functional quality is synonymous with service delivery or customer-employee interaction (Ali et al., 2016; Polyakova & Mirza, 2016; Rosenbusch et al., 2018). Rust and Oliver (1994) then added the dimension of the service environment, which involves the atmosphere or setting within which the service was provided (Ali et al., 2016; Khader & Madhavi, 2017; Marchiori et al., 2017; Polyakova & Mirza, 2016). Although literature often portrays the Nordic perspective, the three-component model was based, and the SERVQUAL as oppositional schools of thought (Sharma & Berad, 2019), their dimensions share some similarities and may complement each other. Service outcome and service environment are somewhat similar to reliability and tangibility, whereas service delivery involves responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. The present study thus considers both SERVQUAL and the three-component model as complementary frameworks.

Past studies have adopted complementary frameworks involving both SERVQUAL and the three-component model as well. Rahayu (2018) utilized an adapted version of the three-component model with insights from the SERVQUAL to suit her study in the field of vocational education in Indonesia. Rahayu (2018) discovered that service quality and customer service influenced customer trust, and consequently, positive word of mouth. The complementary framework of SERVQUAL and the three-component model also applies to the fitness and recreation industry (Cheung & Woo, 2016). Cheung and Woo (2016) combined the SERVQUAL and the three-component model and other theories to establish their structural model. They found client-employee interaction quality, which includes the SERVQUAL's responsiveness, assurance, and empathy, as well as the three-component model's service delivery, was the most significant factor influencing overall service quality and customer satisfaction within the fitness and recreation industry (Cheung & Woo, 2016).

Within the healthcare industry, Rosenbusch et al. (2018) used the elements of both SERVQUAL and the three-component model to also arrive at a specific model for patient satisfaction. Interaction quality, involves responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and service delivery, as well as outcome quality, which involves reliability and service product, appeared to be major influencers of patient satisfaction (Rosenbusch et al., 2018). Environmental quality, which involves tangibility and service environment, also influences patient satisfaction (Rosenbusch et al., 2018). These studies supported the complementary nature of the SERVQUAL and the three-component model, showing how a single investigation can utilize both regarding service quality and customer satisfaction.

Rival Theories

Aside from the SERVQUAL and the three-component model, researchers have utilized other theories and models to explore service quality and customer satisfaction. Although considered rival theories, these theories may not exactly oppose the SERVQUAL or the three-component model; rather, they may simply frame concepts differently or add or omit certain concepts. The following sub-sections examine some of the common rival theories found in the service quality and customer satisfaction literature.

Service-Dominant Logic

Business theories commonly revolve around two types of logic: goods-dominant (G-D) or service-dominant (S-D). The S-D logic serves as an overarching theory for many contemporary service quality theories. It focuses on intangible services or applied knowledge and abilities rather than tangible goods or products (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). The G-D logic was the prevailing business logic during the industrial revolution, where production was paramount. Since then, consumers have begun to place value on the services surrounding the products. Researchers have since re-conceptualized the S-D logic model to meet this phenomenon (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). The S-D logic states that services, rather than goods, are based on transactions (Akaka et al., 2018). In examining customer satisfaction, the S-D logic represents the current philosophy in the field of business.

The S-D logic brings more than just a shift in focus from goods to services. This logic also inspired the concept of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Traditional views of the producer and consumer relationships have replaced the concept of actors collaborating in value exchanges. This view sees both the producer and consumer as value co-creators who contribute to the service ecosystems through cooperation and coordination (Akaka et al., 2018; Vargo & Lusch, 2017). Business is then not about selling goods to consumers but about cocreating to serve each other's' needs (Huarng et al., 2018). Value cocreation is thus bidirectional and serves to benefit all actors involved in the process (Fujita & Kase, 2016). Taking the food industry, for instance, the chef delivers services by cooking food, and customers deliver value by giving comments the chef could utilize in improving his or her services or by recommending the restaurant to others (Fujita & Kase, 2016). This logic entails a service-for-service exchange between the chef and the customer, thus co-creating mutual value within the service ecosystem (Akaka et al., 2018). Current researchers that focus on customer satisfaction thus employ the S-D logic in considering customers' input as a valuable resource.

As an over-arching theory, the S-D logic may not necessarily be considered a rival theory for the present study; rather, it may serve as an underlying philosophy behind both the SERVQUAL and the three-component model. Although S-D logic focuses on services rather than tangible goods, it does not entirely ignore the value of tangible goods

(Im & Qu, 2017). On the contrary, it focuses on intangibles concerning tangibles (Koskela et al., 2018). The S-D logic substitutes the obsolete notion that services are purely intangible (Akaka et al., 2018). This logic considers tangible goods or objects as parts of service. Im and Qu (2017) purported that customers who are satisfied with the physical environment may be more motivated to participate in co-creation. The SERVQUAL and the three-component model consider both tangible and intangible resources, aligning them to the S-D logic.

Nordic Perspective

As aforementioned, most researchers consider the Nordic perspective to be the European counterpart of the SERVQUAL. Like the three-component model, it is not necessarily a rival theory for the present study, but a complementary theory that should also be examined. The Nordic perspective was conceptualized in 1984 by Gronroos, making it older than the SERVQUAL (Loyyl & Kumar, 2018). The Nordic perspective then encapsulates a more traditional viewpoint of service quality wherein customers based their satisfaction on two explicit dimensions of technical or functional quality (Loyyl & Kumar, 2018). The Nordic perspective, having only these two dimensions, presents a more global perspective on service quality, and thus is considered to have more universality than the SERVQUAL (Hemsley-Brown & Alnawas, 2016). The present study thus acknowledged the utility of the Nordic perspective by including its derivate, which is the three-component model.

Third Order Factor Model

Aside from the Nordic perspective and SERVQUAL, another prominent theory in service quality is the hierarchical approach or third order factor model by Brady and Cronin (2001). The third order factor model is based upon an older idea that service quality perceptions involve multiple hierarchical levels, wherein the primary levels consist of the three-component model's dimensions (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Brady and Cronin (2001) purported that the three dimensions are further deconstructed by customers into sub-dimensions (Arguello et al., 2019; Khader & Madhavi, 2017; Sumaedi et al., 2016). As this model derives from the three-component model, it is also not the same as the present study's framework.

The distinguishing factor of the third order factor model is its complexity in including subdimensions in its structure. Under the service delivery dimension of interaction, quality lays the subdimensions of attitude, behavior, and expertise (Khader & Madhavi, 2017). The service environment dimension or physical environment quality contains the subdimensions of ambient conditions, design, and social factors. Service product or outcome quality involves the subdimensions of waiting time, tangibles, and valence (Khader & Madhavi, 2017). Brady and Cronin (2001) also considered some dimensions of SERVQUAL as vital modifiers of subdimensions, including reliability, responsiveness, and empathy. Customers use these modifiers to gauge whether subdimensions are reliable or not, responsive or not, and empathetic or not (Brady & Cronin, 2001). Considering how the third order factor model is an amalgamation of various service quality theories, it may also serve as a complementary theory to SERVQUAL and the three-component model.

Importance-Performance Analysis

Although less prominent than the SERVQUAL or the Nordic perspective, importance-performance analysis (IPA) has established a foothold in the field of customer satisfaction and service quality research. Researchers purported that the IPA could overcome the shortcomings of the SERVQUAL in identifying customer priorities on which attributes of a business to improve upon (Pai et al., 2016). The IPA utilizes a matrix, wherein one axis measures customers' perceived performance of a service quality dimension, and the other measures how important that dimension is to the customer (Dabestani et al., 2016). Although SERVQUAL only established the gap between customer expectations and perceived performance, the IPA considers customers' priorities, further informing business leaders and managers regarding what aspects to improve.

The IPA's matrix serves as its distinguishing feature providing more information regarding customer satisfaction. The matrix consists of four quadrants placed interchangeably in different studies (Dabestani et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2016). First, the "possible overkill" quadrant represents dimensions in which the business excelled but which the customer finds unimportant. Second, dimensions within the "keep up the good work" quadrant are those that customers deemed to be important and well-provided by the business. Third, the "concentrate here" quadrant should be the business's focus, as it represents dimensions that are considered important to the customer but which the performance has been substandard. Lastly, the "low priority" quadrant contains dimensions that the business has performed well in but are not important to the customers

(Dabestani et al., 2016; Yin et al., 2016). Although IPA has the advantage of establishing customers' priorities, it does not provide any specific dimensions to measure. Yin et al. (2016) thus combined the two models in a framework that measured dimensions of the SERVQUAL using the IPA matrix. Thus, researchers can consider the IPA model as a complementary model to the SERVQUAL.

The theories presented in this section were prominent theories purported to be "rival" theories to SERVQUAL and the three-component model. The S-D logic, Nordic perspective, third order factor model, and the IPA each bring their own contributions to customer satisfaction and service quality research. Despite their differences, this review displayed how these theories could be complementary to each other. The SERVQUAL and the three-component model together were deemed appropriate for the present study. As such, I selected them as the theoretical frameworks of this qualitative multiple case study. With the help of these two theories, this review proceeded to explore the different aspects of customer satisfaction within the food industry and restaurant setting.

Food Industry and Restaurant Setting Service Quality

The present study explores customer satisfaction within the food industry and restaurant setting. This industry has undergone much development over time, including its growing emphasis on service quality (Cheng et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016). Restaurants are no longer simply spaces for purchasing and consuming food. They are now considered leisure spaces where food experiences take place (Lee et al., 2016). This industry has also grown more and has become more competitive over the years as more restaurants join the industry, and customers gain more options (Lee et al., 2016; Taha &

Ng, 2019). The developments within the industry have also led to higher expectations from customers (Lee et al., 2016). Customers now look towards different aspects other than food quality in evaluating and patronizing restaurants. As such, restaurant owners and managers are tasked not just to improve their food quality but also to discover other novel ways to make them stand out from the competition and provide the most satisfying food experiences for their customers (Lee et al., 2016; Taha & Ng, 2019). Restaurant owners and managers are thus pressured to make critical decisions regarding the different aspects of restaurant management and their limited resources (Nyaribo et al., 2017). These developments thus call for continuous research on competitive strategies and criteria restaurant owners and managers should consider.

The previous sections emphasized the vital role of service quality in achieving customer satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendations. Service quality can provide a competitive advantage that restaurants need to succeed or remain in the industry (Tripathi & Dave, 2017b). Aside from traditional criteria such as food quality and price, various aspects of service quality such as the physical and social environment in restaurants have been linked to restaurants' success factors (Sweeney et al., 2016; Tripathi & Dave, 2017b). These service quality factors provide a positive food experience that meets customers physiological as well as psychological needs and expectations (Chien-Jung, 2017). Furthermore, restaurants are a part of the service industry (Chien-Jung, 2017), making this setting more reliant on service quality. Existing literature on the food industry features different ideas on improving restaurants' service quality. A common denominator among them is the agreement that service quality, in general, plays a vital role in a restaurants’ success.

Various studies place importance on the value of service quality across different types of restaurant settings from different locations around the world. The fine dining setting is particularly stringent on providing high-quality services (Garg & Amelia, 2016). These restaurants charge large amounts of money for their services. Fine dining restaurants are considered full-service restaurants that involve high-quality food, services, and aesthetics (Shahzadi et al., 2018). Expectations are thus higher for these types of restaurants. Mhlanga (2018), who investigated 17 restaurants in East London, South Africa, stated that fine dining restaurants in this area had the highest service quality compared to casual and fast-food restaurants. In Pakistan, Shahzadi et al. (2018) noted fine dining restaurants excelled in food taste and atmospheric quality, specifically, in taste, food presentation, cleanliness, comfort and room temperature, and interior design and décor. In Garg and Amelia’s (2016) study on fine dining restaurants in Malaysia, they deemed food quality an important factor but noted customers paid more attention to human traits or employee-related attributes. These attributes include employees’ behaviors, body language, tone of voice, and provision of individualized attention (Garg & Amelia, 2016), falling under the categories of responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Although the specific dimensions of focus may differ between these studies, the common denominator is that service quality expectations and perceptions are generally higher for fine dining restaurants.

A type of restaurant that offers full service similar to fine dining, but with significantly lower prices, is the casual dining restaurant. Compared to the stringent services offered in fine dining restaurants, casual dining restaurants offer more relaxed services to match their lower prices (Villanueva, 2017). Casual dining, with its place in between high-end fine dining and quick and easy fast-food, has become a growing trend worldwide over the past few decades (Ngcwangu et al., 2018; Villanueva, 2017). In the South African casual dining sector, researchers found that all dimensions were generally acceptable by customers (Ngcwangu et al., 2018). However, Omar et al. (2016, displayed different results in their study on casual Arabic restaurants in Selangor, Malaysia. They found that despite the fact that all five dimensions were significant predictors of customer satisfaction, customers in Selangor were generally unsatisfied with casual dining reliability and responsiveness (Omar et al., 2016). Casual dining customers in Klang Valley, also in Malaysia, were surveyed regarding which dimensions were most important to them (Clemes et al., 2018). For this particular group, outcome quality appears to be the most important. Service quality in general, customer satisfaction, and restaurant image were all found to significantly influence re-patronization intentions, with restaurant image as the most influential. This study, however, found and utilized different sub-dimensions related to service quality (Clemes et al., 2018). Based on these studies, it appears that casual dining offers more flexible service quality than fine dining restaurants. This is probably due to its less stringent nature than fine dining restaurants, allowing casual restaurants to differ in many aspects. Thus, the casual restaurant industry engenders more innovation in service quality efforts as each restaurant is given more freedom in determining what would make them stand out from the rest.

At the other end of the spectrum, far from fine dining, the fast-food industry has grown significantly in many countries and has received much attention in the research field. Taking its roots from ready-to-eat food stalls in medieval times, fast-food dining revolves around the concept of easy food preparation and takeaway food products (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016). Busier and more individualized lifestyles in the modern era gave rise to the fast-food trend, with its quick service and customer-oriented setup (Liu et al., 2017; Patabandige & Yapa, 2016). Fast-food dining has been linked to the concept of urbanization and is thus present in most major cities around the world (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016; Wang et al., 2018). Thus, its frequency and fast-paced service make it a unique and particularly competitive sub-industry in the general food industry.

Unlike fine dining and casual restaurants, fast-food restaurants do not offer full service. This distinction may thus engender differences in customer expectations and perceptions for this specific sub-industry. In Namin's (2017) study on fast-food restaurants in the U. S., all five dimensions of service quality were deemed important to customers' perception of service quality; however, service quality did not directly influence customers' behavioral intentions. Instead, customer satisfaction acted as a mediator for this relationship (Namin, 2017). Namin (2017) then purported food quality and pricing were vital factors to consider in improving customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry. Liu et al. (2017), on the other hand, purported service quality significantly and directly influenced both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty in Taiwan's fast-food industry. Whether or not service quality directly influenced behavioral intentions, most studies agreed that customer satisfaction plays a vital role in this relationship. In the fast-food industry of Johannesburg, customers were generally dissatisfied with the service quality, as their expectations exceeded the perceived performance of the fast-food restaurants (Akilimalissiga et al., 2017). Due to this negative finding, customers' repurchasing behavior also showed negative results, thus confirming the value of customer satisfaction (Akilimalissiga et al., 2017). Fast-food restaurants should then place great importance on promoting customer satisfaction through service quality.

Researchers have suggested vital points for each dimension of service quality on which fast-food restaurants should focus. Service accuracy or reducing errors in service appeared to be vital in this fast-paced industry (Liu et al., 2017; Namin, 2017). As fast-food restaurants involve quick service delivery, prompt responses to customers' complaints and inquiries are important (Liu et al., 2017). Aside from providing fast services, customers expect the employees of fast-food restaurants customers to provide pleasant and courteous services (Liu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018). The fast-paced nature of this sub-industry may make individualized services more difficult; however, fast-food restaurants should still increase efforts in providing special services such as to disabled customers and to children (Liu et al., 2017). Wang et al.'s (2018) findings from fast-food restaurants in China revealed empathy as the most important dimension. Studies generally agreed that tangibility was the least important dimension in fast-food restaurants (Namin, 2017; Patabandige & Yapa, 2016; Wang et al., 2018); however, fast-food restaurants should at least ensure their facilities and employees appear neat and clean (Liu et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018). The unique manifestations of service quality dimensions in this food sub-industry set it apart from the general food industry to achieve customer satisfaction. Simultaneously, the fast-food industry also appears to rely on the same dimensions of service quality and the same relationship between service quality, customer satisfaction, and behavioral intentions as the general food industry. Restaurant owners and managers should then pay attention to these dimensions as well as the nuances between sub-industries when seeking to improve their customer satisfaction.

Customer Satisfaction

The value of customer satisfaction on increasing behavioral intentions in the food industry was established in the previous section. Customer satisfaction has been linked to various success factors in business, such as customer loyalty, repurchasing behavior, and word-of-mouth (Bujisic et al., 2018; Diab et al., 2016; Rana et al., 2017). Improving customer satisfaction indeed engenders numerous benefits for businesses. What business owners and managers need are strategies to improve customer satisfaction within their respective fields.

The S-D logic presented earlier in this chapter is the predominant philosophy in the current era's business field. As such, business owners highly value customer satisfaction (Fujita & Kase, 2016). Its relationship with service customers' perceptions of service quality has been a subject of debate in the literature. The common school of thought is service quality positively influences customer satisfaction and vice versa (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Diab et al., 2016; Pai et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Rana et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). On the contrary, customer satisfaction is also positively related to customer expectations, increasing its gap with perceived performance, thus negatively influencing service quality perceptions (Nguyen et al., 2018). Despite this alternative idea, Nguyen et al. (2018), who studied fast-food restaurants in the UK, have confirmed that dimensions of service quality are positively correlated to customer satisfaction. Specifically, tangibility, assurance, and responsiveness are significantly correlated with customer satisfaction, whereas reliability and empathy have weaker correlations with customer satisfaction (Nguyen et al., 2018). Inconclusive findings regarding service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction have led researchers to explore specific aspects that may improve customer satisfaction for different types of businesses.

A prevalent debate in the food industry is the concept of standardization versus customization. Standardization in the restaurant business serves the mass market idea, where products and services do not vary, and predictability takes precedence over individualization (Ding & Keh, 2016). In this circumstance, customers would know what to expect from the restaurant at all times. Standardized dining has been purported to provide more satisfaction to customers in collectivist cultures. On the contrary, customization applies some level of adaptation or individualization in their products and services (Ding & Keh, 2016). This setup allows customers more freedom in decision-making regarding the type of services they wish to receive (Wolf & Zhang, 2016). Although this freedom may be attractive in that it could allow customers more options to satisfy themselves, it could also have negative connotations concerning the idea that customers may not always know what they want (Ding & Keh, 2016). The complexity of customization may also lead to longer waiting times, leading to lower satisfaction from customers (Ding & Keh, 2016). Restaurants then have the dilemma of finding the right balance between standardization and customization to meet their customers' satisfaction needs.

Studies regarding standardization and customization have explored nuances in customers' preferences. For example, Ding and Keh (2016) found customer satisfaction in relation to standardization and customization relied on the customers' consumption goals. Hedonic consumption, which involves leisurely dining or dining for fun and playfulness, required more customization to achieve customer satisfaction (Ding & Keh, 2016). On the contrary, utilitarian consumption, which considers dining out to be more of a task than an act of leisure, required more standardized aspects. Unsurprisingly, customers who reported a high need for uniqueness preferred customization to standardization regardless of consumption goals, whereas customers who reported a low need for uniqueness based their preferences on consumption goals (Ding & Keh, 2016).

Wolf and Zhang (2016) found gender differences regarding customization, wherein females preferred a higher level of control and participation in decision-making than males. They found females were more satisfied with build-your-own menus, which allowed for full customization, and males were more satisfied with you-pick-two menus, which only allowed for partial customization (Wolf & Zhang, 2016). Therefore, restaurants targeted towards certain genders may consider these findings in establishing their menus for customer satisfaction (Wolf & Zhang, 2016). These nuances should thus be taken into account when considering standardization and customization aspects in a restaurant.

Standardization and customization need not be mutually exclusive. For instance, you-pick-two menus only allow customization at the final stage of food preparation, which makes it a middle-ground option between standardization and customization (Wolf & Zhang, 2016). Although these two options both have their advantages, and the literature shows gender and consumption goal differences for each of them, Kasiri et al. (2017) purported standardization had more impact on technical and functional qualities in healthcare, education, and hospitality industries. Kasiri et al. (2017) then stated that the integration of standardization and customization was necessary for achieving the optimal service quality to improve customer satisfaction. Thus, this aspect of service quality requires careful consideration by restaurant owners and managers to establish the right balance between the two options.

Customers who choose to spend money in dining out rather than at home would likely select restaurants that would give them the most value for their money. In Rana et al.'s (2017) study of fast-food customers in Pakistan, they found food quality, service quality, and price-value ratio were all influential in customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions, the price-value ratio had the strongest influence. Interestingly, in the findings of Alhelalat et al.'s (2017) study on fine dining tourist customers in Jordan, the price-value ratio was the weakest influencer for customer satisfaction. The difference between the two studies could lie in the sub-industry of focus. The fast-food industry ideally provides quick and affordable meals, which means customers who choose to dine in this sub-industry would likely pay attention to the affordability of their menu.

On the contrary, customers know fine dining restaurants for their expensive services, which means customers who choose to dine in this sub-industry would be willing to spend more and pay little attention to the price-value ratio. In the research by Alhelalat et al. (2017), participants who were tourists could also be a factor in the difference as tourists may not be as familiar with pricing in the country as locals. Such nuances must then be considered by restaurant owners and managers to set the right prices in conjunction with the type of services they offer in their restaurants.

Sub-industries within the food industry may indeed be important factors in achieving customer satisfaction. Hanks et al. (2017) enumerated several categories of restaurants. Restaurants could fall under quick-service, midscale, moderate upscale, upscale, and business dining (Hanks et al., 2017). Other categorizations include family, casual, fine dining, sports bars, celebrity restaurants, steakhouses, theme restaurants, and a plethora of other possible restaurant types. Each type of restaurant engenders a specific set of norms to follow (Hanks et al., 2017). Food safety, which researchers found to be a vital factor in customer satisfaction, was perceived differently by customers depending on the restaurant type (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019). Customers in limited-service settings such as fast-food and quick service restaurants placed more value on food safety as a factor for their satisfaction. Customers in full-service or table-service restaurants, such as casual or fine dining restaurants, paid less attention to food safety in determining their satisfaction (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019). Cha and Borchgrevink (2019) purported customers had pre-set expectations that full-service settings provided safe foods as compared to limited-service settings. As aforementioned, fine dining restaurants are more stringent in terms of service quality and would have narrower contextual norms than casual restaurants (Hanks et al., 2017). Although the wider contextual norms allowed casual restaurants to be more flexible, this could affect customer satisfaction because customers' expectations are more diverse within this setting (Hanks et al., 2017). Restaurant owners and managers must then examine each attribute of their restaurants considering the restaurant type to meet the contextual norms that may influence customer satisfaction.

The human aspect, in general, is one aspect of business that may influence customer satisfaction across restaurant types and even business types. Frontline employees in different types of businesses serve as the link between the customer and the organization because they are the ones who mainly interact with these customers (Alhelalat et al., 2017). These interactions represent a large part of customers' food experience when dining out (Alhelalat et al., 2017). Employee behavior, appearance, and overall presence thus influence customers' satisfaction with such experiences (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Hanks & Line, 2018). Employee selection and training are then vital for businesses in improving their customer satisfaction.

Employees may not be the only vital human aspect in the service industry. Hanks and Line (2018) described the importance of social servicescape, which involves all human aspects of dining out, in the satisfaction of customers. Social servicescape includes restaurant employees and other customers (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019; Hanks &

Line, 2018). Customers feel more at ease in an environment shared by other customers who are similar to themselves, because this phenomenon bodes well with their self-concept and self-esteem (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). Branding is then vital in establishing a business identity with which customers could identify, thus attracting similar customers (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). Restaurants at the more stringent end of the spectrum, such as fine dining restaurants, should also consider the expected behaviors of all their customers. Enforcing dress codes in these types of restaurants is one way to control this human aspect of social servicescape (Hanks & Line, 2018). Human aspects of the business may be difficult to control but is a vital factor in customers' perceptions and their satisfaction regarding their experiences with the business. Because restaurant owners and managers have more control over employees than customers, the present study examines employee training strategies that may increase customer satisfaction. The following section presents recommendations from the literature regarding training strategies.

Employee Training Strategies

With the current era of S-D logic, services, including employee skills, behaviors, and knowledge, have become targets for business strategies. Several researchers have emphasized the value of training and development for the modern employee to meet the modern needs of customers (Arroyo-Lopez et al., 2016; Chien-Jung, 2017; Voon, 2017). Particularly for the restaurant setting, employee training on service quality has been deemed useful for improving customer satisfaction (Diab et al., 2016; Villanueva, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Training may also involve not just knowledge and skills but also personality and behaviors that aid in service quality (Villanueva, 2017). This section explores the various views in the literature regarding restaurant employee training strategies.

Existing literature points to different dimensions that should be the focus of employee training in the food industry. The most common dimension recommended by past researchers to focus on employee training is the dimension of empathy (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Researchers found this to be true in both fast-food (Adeinat, 2019; Wang et al., 2018) and fine dining settings (Shahzadi et al., 2018). These researchers argued that managers must train employees to provide individualized service to make customers feel taken care of, hence increasing satisfaction (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Although these researchers recognize the value of other dimensions, the results of these studies revealed that empathy brought about the most satisfaction and behavioral intentions (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Training on empathy could thus focus on providing individualized services and anticipating customers' needs.

In relation to empathy, researchers have also focused on how employees can meet customers' psychological needs. Chien-Jung (2017) has suggested that employees remember customers' names, titles, and even interests to increase their repurchasing intentions. These are prime examples of individualizing services for potential returning patrons. On the contrary, Kuo et al. (2018) suggested that restaurant employees focus more on first-time customers than returning ones. The effects of service quality appeared to be higher for first-time customers, hence engendering more customer satisfaction (Kuo et al., 2018). Restaurant patrons or returning customers may be more forgiving of employees since they are more acquainted with the employees and with the restaurant itself (Kuo et al., 2018). As such, Kuo et al. (2018) purported, giving more attention to first-time customers would yield more positive results for the business. Whichever customer group employees focus on, it is clear, training them to individualize their service and provide more empathy to customers would improve customer satisfaction.

Other studies have identified different dimensions as primary focal points in restaurant employee training. Kuo et al. (2018), who recognized the value of individualized attention, also alleged responsiveness, particularly towards first-time customers, was of utmost importance in employee training. On the other hand, Diab et al. (2016) suggested that responsiveness did not significantly influence customer satisfaction. Instead, Diab et al. (2016) considered assurance as the most important dimension that employees needed to specialize in to improve customer satisfaction. Researchers have purported that assurance engenders trust from customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Thus, it is unsurprising this dimension could improve customer satisfaction, because customers would be certain employees are treating them to the best of their abilities.

Concerning the dimension of assurance, researchers have also explored the value of food allergy training for restaurant employees. Allergic reactions to food are events that may occur in restaurants and may prove dangerous and even fatal to customers (Lee & Sozen, 2016). These unfortunate events may occur due to employees' lack of knowledge and ability to handle special food requests of customers with allergies (Lee & Sozen, 2016). In McAdams et al.'s (2018) study in Ontario, Canada, they found food allergy training and resources were generally lacking. Although restaurant employees were knowledgeable regarding basic food allergy information, there were a few misconceptions, even though seemingly minor, may prove fatal to customers. For instance, most employees believed that small amounts of allergenic foods were harmless towards allergic customers and applying extreme heat towards foods may eliminate their allergens (McAdams et al., 2018). Restaurant owners and managers must then consider food allergy training to increase the assurance dimension of their service quality.

Due to the modern S-D logic and greater emphasis on hedonic food consumption, diners in the modern era have higher psychological needs that must be met along with their physiological needs. Employees who attend to psychological needs were purported to improve customer satisfaction by gaining their trust and confidence (Chien-Jung, 2017). Employees' psychological attributes are also vital in improving service quality, because they interact closely with customers. Employees who face customers daily should be emotionally stable and motivated (Voon, 2017). Mathe et al. (2014) endorsed the psychological capital (PsyCap) training for restaurant employees. PsyCap training involves training employees to build self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Mathe et al., 2014). Researchers have purported that these psychological qualities of the employees improve employee-customer relationships in the restaurant industry. They also improved the service quality of the restaurant, hence indirectly improving customer satisfaction (Mathe et al., 2014). Psychological aspects of employee training, whether towards customers or the employees themselves, representing another focal point that restaurant owners and managers should consider in training strategies.

The focal points for restaurant employee training above are general points for all restaurant owners and managers to consider. The literature, however, also provides contextual differences that should be considered when implementing training strategies. Arroyo-Lopez et al. (2016) suggested that training strategies should be based on a situational diagnosis of customers' needs and the restaurants' goals. The contextual differences per restaurant type presented earlier in this chapter (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019; Hanks et al., 2017) may serve as examples of how and why restaurant owners and managers should modify their training strategies to meet the needs of their customers. Because customers have different expectations from different types of restaurants, businesses should train employees to meet and exceed those needs. Polyakova and Mirza (2016), thus, called for more industry-specific research on service quality models that could serve as guides for business owners to come up with and improve their strategies. The present study tackles the training strategies that nonfranchised restaurants may use to improve their service quality and customer satisfaction.

Transition

This section introduced the problem of organizational leaders, specifically nonfranchised restaurant managers, regarding training strategies to improve customer satisfaction. The food industry or restaurant setting is highly competitive (Gao et al., 2018; Voon, 2017). In such fields, maintaining high customer satisfaction is of utmost importance for success and survivability (Pizam et al., 2016). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore strategies some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. These potential strategies may guide restaurant owners and managers in establishing and implementing training programs for their employees.

A qualitative multiple case study was selected to provide in-depth details regarding training strategies that businesses implement in real-world settings. Nonfranchised restaurants that have operated for 5 years or more was selected to participate in this study, because their rich experiences would provide the best responses to meet the purpose of the study. The main research question for this study is: What strategies do nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training? With the aid of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) and the three-component model (Rust & Oliver, 1994) as theoretical frameworks, I aim to answer this research question through interviews with the selected nonfranchised restaurants' managers. Answering this research question and achieving the study's purpose would potentially produce significant contributions to the food industry. Results from this study may lead to new employee training strategies for improving customer satisfaction that nonfranchised restaurant managers may use to implement. The strategies potentially resulting from this study could also improve restaurant employees' self-worth and self-dignity.

This section also contained a review of the literature regarding related concepts for this present study. The review commenced with a thorough examination of the two theoretical frameworks for this study: SERVQUAL and the three-component model. The basic premise of SERVQUAL is that service quality describes the gap between customers' expectations and their perceptions of performance and that this gap represents the factors that businesses need to improve upon (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Several studies have emphasized service quality's relationship with customer satisfaction and other business success factors (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Diab et al., 2016; Rana et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). The SERVQUAL presents five dimensions of service quality that influence customer satisfaction, namely: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Bhuian, 2016; Liu & Lee, 2016; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019). Past studies have utilized these dimensions in different fields and found them to adequately measure service quality (Bhuian, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018; Liu & Lee, 2016; Marathe, 2017). The SERVQUAL was also considered an effective model for the food industry (Josiam et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016). The SERVQUAL is thus considered a leading theory in the field of service quality.

Previous researchers have presented come criticisms regarding the SERVQUAL. The main criticism concerns its universality across different contexts (Kar, 2016; Kumar et al., 2018; Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). Researchers have thus adopted the SERVQUAL to develop their own industry-specific scales, such as the DINESERV (Adeinat, 2019; Arroyo-Lopez et al., 2016; Kuo et al., 2018; Tripathi & Dave, 2017a). Researchers have also identified SERVQUAL's focus on functional quality over technical quality as problematic (Mujinga, 2019). Lastly, the five dimensions of SERVQUAL have also been subject to criticism and modifications or omissions (Ocampo et al., 2017; Park et al., 2018). Despite these criticisms, SERVQUAL remains the luminary model in service quality research (Mujinga, 2019). Its utility in the past and recent research support its usability in business research.

The three-component model (Rust & Oliver, 1994) based on the SERVQUAL's counterpart, the Nordic perspective, serves as the present study's other theoretical framework complementing the SERVQUAL. The three-component model's dimensions consist of service product, service delivery, and service environment (Rust & Oliver, 1994). Past studies have similarly utilized both the SERVQUAL and the three-component model as complementary frameworks (Cheung & Woo, 2016; Rahayu, 2018; Rosenbusch et al., 2018). These studies thus supported the present study's use of both these theories.

Several rival theories were also explored in this section. The S-D logic serves as an overarching theory that highlights services based on transactions or value cocreation (Akaka et al., 2018). The Nordic perspective, commonly referred to as the European counterpart of the SERVQUAL, explains service quality as a product of technical and functional qualities (Loyyl & Kumar, 2018). The third order factor model builds upon the three-component model and adds hierarchical levels to include sub-dimensions below the three dimensions (Brady & Cronin, 2001). The IPA proposes a matrix that measures how customers perceive business attributes as important and how well they are performed (Dabestani et al., 2016). Although these "rival" theories propose different dimensions and ways of measurement they may complement the SERVQUAL and the three-component model.

The literature review proceeded to describe the food industry and restaurant setting. A historical overview of the industry revealed its evolution from simply a space for purchasing and eating food to a space for leisure and hedonic food experiences (Lee et al., 2016). Restaurant owners and managers thus seek ways to improve their service quality to stand out from the competition (Lee et al., 2016; Taha & Ng, 2019). Common types of restaurant categories were explored regarding their service quality. With their expensive food and full-service setup, fine dining restaurants engendered higher expectations from all dimensions of service quality (Shahzadi et al., 2018). Although casual restaurants offer full services, they are more lenient and flexible than fine dining restaurants and consequently more vulnerable to situational and contextual factors in determining service quality (Clemes et al., 2018; Villanueva, 2017). Fast-food restaurants offer limited services and focus on quick and easy food preparation and service (Patabandige & Yapa, 2016). Various researchers have identified different dimensions as the focus of fast-food restaurants; however, most have agreed tangibility was the least important dimension in this sub-industry (Namin, 2017; Patabandige & Yapa, 2016; Wang et al., 2018). Thus, the food industry and restaurant setting comprise a wide variety of sub-industries that carry their own complexities in service quality.

Customer satisfaction in the food industry was also explored. The complex relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction was described (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Diab et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2018; Pai et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Rana et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). Although the directionality and dimensional aspects of these two concepts remain inconclusive in the literature, the common perception is that service quality is positively related to customer satisfaction (Alhelalat et al., 2017; Diab et al., 2016; Pai et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Rana et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). Based on this premise, restaurants with high service quality would ostensibly engender higher customer satisfaction.

The concept of standardization versus customization was also presented, because it likewise influenced customer satisfaction. Nuances in customer attributes and consumption goals were purported to influence standardization and customization preferences (Ding & Keh, 2016; Wolf & Zhang, 2016). As such, restaurant managers must find the right balance between the two concepts to meet their customers' demands. The price-value ratio was found to be a significant factor in improving customer satisfaction, but mostly for fast-food restaurants where customers sought affordable products (Rana et al., 2017). Restaurant types provided contextual nuances that engendered different criteria for customer satisfaction (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019; Hanks et al., 2017). The general theory behind these studies is that the contextual factors within the food industry and restaurant setting influence customer satisfaction.

A common factor for customer satisfaction, not just in the food industry but in most businesses, is the human aspect. The human aspect includes both employees and other customers within the restaurant setting, or as Hanks and Line (2018) describes it, the social servicescape. Customers were more satisfied when they were surrounded by other customers who were similar to themselves (Erkmen & Hancer, 2019). This part of the social servicescape, however, is more difficult for restaurant managers to control. The other part, the employees, are easier to control and are thus the focus of most restaurant managers in improving customer satisfaction.

Employee training strategies to improve customer satisfaction were then explored. Most researchers considered the empathy dimension of SERVQUAL to be the most important point of training for restaurant employees (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Restaurant employees ought to be trained in individualized service to improve customer satisfaction. Researchers have argued on which types of customers to focus on. Chien-Jung (2017) purported employees needed to remember restaurant patrons' names, titles, and interests to improve the chances of their returnability.

On the other hand, Kuo et al. (2018) argued that first-time customers were more in need of individualized services. Researchers identified the dimension of assurance identified as a vital point of restaurant employee training. A prominent topic for restaurant employee training programs is food allergy training (Lee & Sozen, 2016; McAdams et al., 2018). Employees who are knowledgeable in food allergies would increase the assurance dimension of service quality, thus improving customer satisfaction and avoiding potentially fatal mistakes.

Aside from the SERVQUAL dimensions, researchers have identified other aspects that are vital for restaurant employee training. The psychological needs of both employees and customers were deemed vital for training strategies (Chien-Jung, 2017; Mathe et al., 2014; Voon, 2017). PsyCap training is one example of how restaurant managers could improve employees' self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, thus improving their service quality and customer satisfaction (Mathe et al., 2014). Psychological training for employees is important, considering how they interact with customers regularly.

The different points for employee training were recommended for restaurants in general; however, the contextual differences within the food industry should also be considered when establishing training strategies (Arroyo-Lopez et al., 2016). In the present study, I examined the sub-industry of nonfranchised restaurants. Training strategies potentially presented in this study are then specific to this context. The following section will describe the methodology for this present study.

Section 2: The Project

My purpose in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. How well employees in the company make customers feel welcome and address their needs forms the basis of customer satisfaction (Lieberman, 2016). Effective customer satisfaction often facilitates revenue growth in many organizations (Brcic & Latham, 2016). In this study, I aimed to determine what training strategies best enhance customer satisfaction, which other businesses may apply within this niche. In Section 2, I cover the following topics: (a) purpose of the study, (b) research method and design, (c) the study's population, (d) ethical research, (e) data collection and techniques, (f) data analysis, and (g) reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

My purpose in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. The targeted population consisted of five nonfranchised restaurant managers located in central Delaware who have improved customer satisfaction through effective training. The criterions used to determine which nonfranchised restaurant would best answer the present research question is business longevity of 5 years or more and successfully improved customer satisfaction through training. The implications for social change include improving the quality of services provided to nonfranchised restaurant customers, improving the perceived self-worth and self-dignity of employees through training, individual development, and expanded employment opportunities and tax revenue the local community.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered the primary instrument (Stewart, 2010; Xu & Storr, 2012). As the primary instrument, the researcher's competence in conducting semi-structured interviews plays an important role in successfully collecting data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Following proper research, guidelines become critical to reap maximum benefits from the selected procedures and produce credible results (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I implemented interview guidelines regarding how to engage the interviewee to obtain rich and detailed responses linked to the research questions guiding the study.

Furthermore, I used an interview protocol to guide the questions during the interviews. Having an interview protocol helps mitigate potential influence from personal biases because it forces the researcher to use the same questions as the foundation across interviews (Xu & Storr, 2012). However, follow-up questions may differ depending on the participant's responses. Additionally, I engaged in researcher reflexivity by acknowledging any personal subjectivities, worldviews, or experiences that may influence the interview process and consciously set them aside so that I could take a neutral position and focus on understanding the phenomenon from the participant's perspective (Stewart, 2010). During the process of data analysis, I adopted the bracketing technique. Bracketing is a technique used to set aside any prejudgment and personal beliefs to allow for an unbiased reception of collected data (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

I developed this research study according to guidelines within the Belmont Report, which explains the central principles of ethics for research involving human subjects. These principles undermine the importance of beneficence, respect, and justice (Miracle, 2016). I addressed the principles of beneficence, respect, and justice by explaining to participants the significance of the study, following the process of informed consent, and ensuring confidential participation through the use of pseudonyms.

Participants

The participants for this qualitative multiple case study were deliberately selected managers from nonfranchised restaurants in central Delaware. Etikan et al. (2016) suggested the purposeful selection of participants to ensure relevant data are collected. This process required identifying individuals who attained the knowledge and experience to speak about the phenomenon of interest (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). A criterion used to determine which nonfranchised restaurant managers would best answer the present research question is those who manage restaurants with business longevity of 5 years or more and have successfully improved customer satisfaction through training. Furthermore, all participants were managers of nonfranchised restaurants within central Delaware. Managers who were employed by franchised restaurants or nonfranchised restaurants outside of central Delaware are not eligible for participation.

Participants were recruited by cold calling nonfranchised restaurants in central Delaware and following up through email. Before I started making calls, I generated a list of potential establishments and their contact information from the Delaware Restaurant

Association’s website. During the phone calls, I asked the manager a series of questions to verify eligibility.

Sanjari et al. (2014) explained that an effective working relationship between the researcher and participant begins with the researcher’s transparency regarding the participant’s role, the participant’s rights, and the purpose of the research. During interviews, the researcher can encourage the maintenance of a cooperative relationship and participants’ willingness to share experiences by showing respect and actively listening (Raheim et al., 2016). To develop a cooperative relationship with the participants in this study, I remained open about the study’s objective and provided a thorough explanation of participants’ rights during the informed consent process. Furthermore, I practiced self-awareness during the interviews to ensure that I gave my full attention to the participant's narratives.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

I chose a qualitative research methodology for this study. Qualitative research is appropriate for the present study because it involves exploring training strategies employed by three business managers of nonfranchised restaurants to enhance customer satisfaction. Information from quantitative research is often aggregated by a measurement instrument, transcribed into a numeric format, and then analyzed to develop the final results (Patten & Newhart, 2017). Researchers may not be able to explore business strategies in an unstructured way if they use a quantitative research method, which is why this method was deemed unsuitable for this present study. Also, because the need to answer the primary research question through statistical measurement is not warranted, it confirms that quantitative research was not suitable for this present study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Mixed methods research involves using elements from both qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore complex phenomena in detail to solve a problem (Halcomb & Hickman, 2015). Researchers who use mixed methods research often seek to answer research questions where qualitative data needed to support or clarify quantitative results or when qualitative data needed to identify relevant variables for quantitative research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Because the research question for this study necessitated qualitative data for an in-depth exploration of a business phenomenon or real-world context, mixed methods research was not appropriate (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Qualitative research includes an in-depth focus on gaining a deeper understanding of a phenomenon that may reveal unknown social facts (Silverman, 2018). Furthermore, research using a qualitative methodology considers real-world issues and everyday contexts from which the phenomenon is experienced (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Embedded within qualitative research is a set of interpretive material practices that facilitate the understanding of a phenomenon (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017). Therefore, qualitative research is the best method for exploring nonfranchised restaurant managers' strategies to train employees for improved customer satisfaction. Using a qualitative method allowed the researcher to obtain in-depth information about the training strategies these managers use and how the strategies work, as well as their advantages and disadvantages according to their perceptions.

Research Design

Researchers can use one of four qualitative designs to collect data and help guide the research flow. These designs include phenomenology, narrative research, ethnography, and multiple or single case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). When designing a research study, the researcher reviews the designs associated with their chosen methodology and selects the best-suited method for answering their research questions (Korstjens & Moser, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I chose a multiple case study design as the appropriate design for this study and I have provided a rationale for this selection in the following section.

Researchers use phenomenology design to seek information concerning the prereflective, everyday experiences of a group or an individual (Vagle, 2018). Furthermore, the use of a phenomenological design should be based on the assumption that shared experiences exist (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Phenomenology design is not suitable for this present study because the purpose is to identify strategies used in a real-world context and not to explore the essence or lived experiences of participants.

Narrative research involves studying individuals' lives by asking them to provide stories about their lives (Clandinin, 2013). In this present research, I identified and studied training strategies and not the lives of participants. Furthermore, data drawn from participants' stories would have restricted the depth of specific training-related information I sought (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, I did not select the narrative design. Ethnography design involves gathering and understanding participants' subjective experiences along with learning about the broad culture-sharing behavior of individuals or groups (Lahlou et al., 2015). I considered ethnography design, but it would have restricted the study to exploring or investigating behaviors rather than business practices. Therefore, I did not choose the ethnography design.

A multiple case study design includes flexibility to explore a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals in depth (Di Mauro et al., 2018). A multiple case study appears to be the best method based on the following conditions: the type of research question, researcher control over actual behavioral events, and the degree of focus on contemporary events (Yin, 2018). For this present study, I sought no control over behavioral events, and I developed the research question to understand *how* a phenomenon works. Finally, my focus in this present study was on contemporary events. Based on all four designs, a multiple case study was most suited for answering the present research question. Thus, I chose multiple case study as the research design.

Population and Sampling

The general population for this study was nonfranchised restaurant managers. The targeted population consists of nonfranchised restaurant managers located in central Delaware who have improved customer satisfaction through effective training. The sample size for this multiple case study was five managers of nonfranchised restaurants, where each participant represented a case. I chose the sample size to remain consistent with sample sizes in published case study research (Guetterman, 2015). Furthermore, using five participants has been documented in the literature as appropriate for reaching data saturation in case study research (Guetterman, 2015; Vasileiou et al., 2018). However, to achieve data saturation using the chosen sample size, I ensured the information collected is rich and detailed (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). For this study, data saturation was met when information collected became redundant (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

Qualitative research uses nonprobability sampling techniques, which means not all individuals within a population have an equal opportunity to participate in the research (Etikan et al., 2016). Nonprobability techniques are often needed because the research is designed to explore a phenomenon experienced by a specific set of individuals (Guetterman, 2015). For this study, I chose to use a nonprobability technique referred to as purposive sampling. Researchers use purposive sampling to deliberately chose participants based on their experiences or the characteristics they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). Specifically, I chose purposive sampling because of the criteria for participation eligibility.

A criterion used to determine which nonfranchised restaurant managers would best answer the present research question is those who manage restaurants with business longevity of five years or more and have successfully improved customer satisfaction through training. Furthermore, all participants had to be managers of nonfranchised restaurants within central Delaware. Managers employed by franchised restaurants or nonfranchised restaurants outside of central Delaware were not eligible for participation. Participants were be recruited by cold calling nonfranchised restaurants in central Delaware and following up through email. Before I started making calls, I generated a list of potential establishments and their contact information. During the phone calls, I asked the manager a series of questions to verify eligibility.

Ethical Research

As in all research, the protection of human subjects by adhering to ethical principles is imperative (Arifin, 2018). Qualitative researchers take on the role of the primary instrument and investigator; therefore, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure all ethical concerns associated with the study are addressed. For this study, I took several measures to ensure the protection and respect of participants and observe ethical standards for human subject research.

I obtained approval to conduct this research from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to collecting data. The IRB oversees ethical considerations in research related to the respect, social justice, and beneficence of human subjects (Green et al., 2006). A copy of the letter of approval from Walden University's IRB can be found in Appendix A. The Walden University IRB necessary to initiate the interview process approval number is 06-19-20-0754227. Additionally, I conducted the study in an ethical way by using informed consent forms and respecting participant security by practicing confidentiality and voluntary participation. The informed consent form verified that participation was voluntary and explain that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation or consequence by informing me of their desire to withdraw (Arifin, 2018). If any participant wished to withdraw after collecting the data, I located the participant's information and destroyed it immediately. Finally, the Belmont Report was used as a guide to ensure that all participants fully understand the process.

I scanned and uploaded all physical documents, such as informed consent forms and other research notes, to a USB hard drive dedicated solely to this research. Once the documents were scanned, they were destroyed by using a micro-cut shredder. To protect the privacy of the participants, I stored the collected data on an encrypted password-protected hard drive. To increase security, I viewed the data only when my laptop was disconnected from the Internet. All Zoom recordings were deleted from their cloud database once downloaded to the research hard drive. Also, during the interview, the security setting prevented participants from inviting others and disabling their ability to record from their computer via Zoom. I will retain the data for 5 years from the date of COA approval. After five years, I will destroy the data by permanently deleting all files on the USB hard drive.

Throughout the process of the study, I used several techniques to ensure participants' names are kept separate from the raw data (Arifin, 2018). However, I obtained identifiers only as part of the informed consent process and kept this information by scanning and uploading it to the secured research hard drive. I then shredded the physical copies. I assigned pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) to the participants to protect their identities. To know which pseudonym corresponded with which participant, I recorded the information in a password-protected Microsoft Word document. Confidentiality is of the utmost importance to this research, which is why all information was kept on an encrypted hard drive and restricted to a specific laptop. In addition to pseudonyms to protect the participant's identity, only Walden University's IRB or its designees were authorized to review research records. Finally, I was clear and honest in the presentation of findings, reporting only verifiable data.

In most studies, the results do not have a direct benefit to the participants. The results of this study may be beneficial to managers of nonfranchised restaurants by enhancing customer satisfaction and stimulating revenue growth. No financial incentives were offered for participation in this research. However, a summary of the findings was provided to all participants. There is no significant risk to participants in this study, given the nature of the study is confined to conducting individual interviews. The risks that were encountered in the study, such as fatigue or mild anxiety, can be experienced in everyday life. There were no safety concerns regarding this study. However, upon any changes (a) I made sure to provide all relevant information to participants, (b) ensured that participants understood all changes and safety concerns with no unanswered questions, and (c) verified that participant's permission had been received before the start the interview.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative studies, the researcher is considered the primary instrument (Stewart, 2010; Xu & Storr, 2012). In case study research, Yin (2018) noted six sources of evidence: participant observation, direct observation, physical artifacts, documentation, interviews, and archival records. I chose semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument and primary source of evidence. Semi-structured interviews are a common data collection method for researchers who seek to gain a better understanding of participants' experiences or perceptions of a phenomenon (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

As the primary instrument, the researcher's competence in conducting semi-structured interviews plays an important role in the successful collection of data (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Even though I had no extensive experience conducting semi-structured interviews, several articles on the subject helped me prepare for data collection. Following proper research, guidelines become critical to reap maximum benefits from the selected procedures and produce credible results (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). I implemented interview guidelines regarding how to engage the interviewee to obtain rich and detailed responses linked to the research questions guiding the study. Furthermore, an interview protocol was developed, then field-tested by three experts to ensure interview questions align with the purpose of the study and research questions (Carcary, 2009). The interview protocol was included in Appendix A.

The choice of using an in-depth interview style allowed easy identification of certain themes based on those predeveloped categories (Sutton & Austin, 2015). To answer the research question, it was essential to ask questions that required nonfranchised managers to recount major changes in customer satisfaction and what events made a difference. The main purpose of having interview questions was to create a guide for completing this study (Carcary, 2009). However, if not used word for word, the essence of interview questions should act as the baseline for replica studies.

As the primary means of data collection, I applied methods to ensure reliability and validity or trustworthiness in case study research (Yin, 2018). To enhance the trustworthiness of the present study, I conducted a modified version of member checking. I used member checking to ensure any verbiage that was unclear or not recorded is included in the study. However, because everything was properly recorded, there were no follow-up questions.

I designed the interview questions to answer the research question: What strategies do nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training? The interview questions include:

1. Which training topics have proven to be effective in enhancing customer satisfaction?
2. How do you measure the effects of training to improve customer satisfaction?
3. What were the key issues employees were most interested in while being trained to improve customer satisfaction?
4. What training methods have you used to help employees improve customer satisfaction?
5. What may be an indication that a change in customer satisfaction training is necessary?
6. What type of continuous training programs do you use to maintain employees' training towards facilitating customer satisfaction improvement?
7. What challenges have occurred while training employees on strategies to improve customer satisfaction?
8. What barriers made it difficult to ensure employees follow training guidelines presented during training?

9. How do you address new issues that you may not have covered in initial employee training of strategies used to improve customer satisfaction?
10. What other comments would you like to share regarding the strategies used to train employees that resulted in improved customer satisfaction?

Data Collection Technique

Before the interviews, I arranged a date and time to meet with each participant. Due to the Coronavirus outbreak of 2020, I conducted all the interviews virtually. Regardless, the present method made it so that it was convenient for the participant and suitable for a one-on-one interview (Arifin, 2018). I used a private room at home and suggested that all participants be in a private setting so that no one else could hear our interview. E-mail was the primary tool for correspondence between each participant regarding the scheduling of the interview.

Prior to the interview, participants reviewed the informed consent form and all questions were answered. Consent may be granted by replying to the email with the words, “I consent” or participants may provide their name, date, and signature on a hard copy of the consent form. The interviews were approximately one hour in length. I asked a series of open-ended questions to elicit information about strategies some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. I used open-ended questions due to their nonformal style, allowing participants to provide as much or as little information in response to interview questions (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I digitally recorded each interview using the Zoom Pro platform and a Samsung Note 10 plus mobile phone as a backup. I informed all participants that the recordings were confidential, and their ability to proceed with the study was contingent upon their agreeing to be digitally recorded during the interview (Arifin, 2018).

After the interview was completed, I informed the participant about what to expect in the next few weeks. I told all participants to expect an e-mail from the researcher for member checking. Member checking is a technique used to enhance the validity of research results (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The e-mail confirmed that a comprehensive review of the transcript was completed with or without follow up questions. In some studies, researchers will provide the actual analysis results and have participants check the accuracy of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Unlike other studies, I did not use the traditional techniques of member checking. Participants were asked questions to clarify any verbiage that was not recorded clearly. Clarification of this type served the same purpose of member checking without adding the burden of participants investing additional time towards this study. After the data analysis was finalized, and the research has been approved, I sent one final e-mail to participants to summarize the finding and let them know the study was complete.

There are advantages and disadvantages to using semi-structured interviews as a source of evidence in qualitative research. The advantages included collecting rich information, using follow-up questions to elicit further information, and only a few participants are needed to reach data saturation (Queirós et al., 2017). The disadvantages are that semi-structured interviews can be time-consuming, and the interview environment can influence interviewee responses (Queirós et al., 2017). Therefore, it is essential to reduce intrusion during interviews so that participants can have sufficient time to speak and share their stories (Arifin, 2018). Tone setting also creates a good rapport that is beneficial when conversing with the interviewee. As a result, interviews progress smoothly, and the collection of information is made easy.

Data Organization Technique

According to Johnson et al. (2010), "one of the most fundamental and important decisions in conducting structured qualitative research is the choice of a software program that can integrate information across many different functions and purposes" (p. 4). I chose to use the NVivo software program to maintain research materials, notes, and data collected during interviews. This program was used organize and track research logs and data and code data for analysis. Using a software program such as NVivo is essential for organizing the information from interviews, because they produce a large amount of data (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

I scanned and uploaded all physical documents such as informed consent forms and other research notes to a USB hard drive dedicated solely to this research. Confidentiality is of the utmost importance to this research, which is why all information was kept on an encrypted hard drive and restricted to a specific laptop (Arifin, 2018). I will retain the data for five years. After five years, I will destroy the data by permanently deleting all files on the USB hard drive.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, I transferred all files to NVivo ~~11~~, a software program that can aid in the organization, storage, and categorization of qualitative data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I chose NVivo instead of ATLAS.ti because the latter is intended primarily for grounded theory, whereas the former is compatible with other qualitative designs, such as case study (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Even though both programs share similar features in terms of coding of chunks of text, sounds, pictures, and videos, NVivo is more user-friendly and accessible to novice researchers (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). I analyzed the data derived from interviews using content analysis, a qualitative analytical technique in which the meanings of data are interpreted through systematic examination (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The specific data analysis strategy I used was directed content analysis and bracketing. Directed content analysis involves using predeveloped categories from the literature as the basis for the coding of data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

For the study, I analyzed the contents of the interview transcripts to generate codes and determine patterns and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Customer and employee interaction, food taste, price charged, parking, and internal decoration are aspects of customer satisfaction elements of nonfranchised restaurants (de Jesus Moreira et al., 2019). The choice of using an in-depth interview style allowed easy identification of certain themes based on those predeveloped categories (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In order to answer the research question, it was essential to ask questions that required nonfranchised managers to recount major changes in customer satisfaction and what events made a difference. During the process of data analysis, I adopted the bracketing technique. Bracketing is a technique used to set aside any prejudgment and personal beliefs to allow for an unbiased reception of collected data (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

After the data have been coded and categorized, the goal was to detect patterns and themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Detecting patterns among participants was facilitated using horizontalization (Vagle, 2018). Horizontalization is the process in which all predevelop categories used during the coding process had an equal value concerning the expressions of the group (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). I produced a unit of general meaning table, utilizing interview responses to include ad verbatim quotations. I used a general meaning table to allow the opportunity to clear any ambiguous responses from participants (Creswell, 2013). The Identified themes reflected common core experiences that tend to occur among the participants in the sample. The final stage of analysis was a narrative report that integrated themes into a coherent story of the entire sample regarding training strategies used by nonfranchised restaurant managers to enhance customer satisfaction.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Dependability is often used in qualitative studies in place of *reliability*. Dependability is the extent to which the results can be considered consistent and can be repeated by an independent researcher (Yilmaz, 2013). Researchers consider a qualitative study trustworthy when the results are dependable, underscoring the importance of developing strategies that can enhance the dependability of the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

To enhance and demonstrate the dependability of the study, I implemented an audit trail (Carcary, 2009). An audit trail entails the use of detailed descriptions of the data collection, data analysis, and every decision made during the course of the study (Creswell, 2013). The rationale for using an audit trail was to give an independent reviewer and other researchers the information they would need to repeat the findings. An audit trail also helps with confirmability.

Validity

In qualitative research, *credibility* is often used in place of *validity*. Credibility is the extent to which the results are based on participants' assessments (Yilmaz, 2013). According to Starks and Trinidad (2007), credibility in qualitative research is dependent on the coherence of the final results. By generating convincing results that are coherent and supported by raw data from the interviews, other researchers are more likely to be convinced of the study's credibility (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). The credibility of this study was enhanced by using a sample size that has been documented in the literature as appropriate for reaching data saturation (Guetterman, 2015; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

To enhance the credibility of the study, I conducted member checking after the transcription process was complete, and the preliminary individual narratives were generated. Member checking is a technique in which qualitative researchers ask for participants' feedback regarding the accuracy of some of the components of the study (Yilmaz, 2013). To conduct member checking, I asked for clarification of any verbiage that seemed unclear during the transcript review process. If corrections, improvements, or suggestions are present to improve the quality of the results, the findings were modified to incorporate changes that can better articulate informed perceptions of the participants.

Confirmability requires the researcher to help ensure research findings are the result of experiences and ideas of participants, rather than the characteristics and preference of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). For each step involved in collecting and analyzing data, a document was prepared to summarize what the researcher did to arrive at the final results. With a clear link among the data, procedures, and results, other researchers are more likely to generate the same results satisfying the questions of transferability, another strategy for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Transferability is the process of applying results from one study towards another similar study (Carcary, 2009). Future research seeking to utilize transferability should take precaution and fully understand this dissertation setting and overall purpose. Techniques such as ethnographic data collection are one tool researchers can employ to explore opportunities for determining if transferability is an option for their study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Understanding transferability allows researchers to fully comprehend and compare their research to others and then determine if the current social setting would allow the desired outcome (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). In some cases, researchers may mistakenly identify transferability as a sought-after generalization Yin (2016). This study's findings should not be generalized and are to be applied only to nonfranchised restaurants within Delaware.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 provided a restatement of the purpose of the study and a description of my role as the researcher. I also provided a description of the chosen research methodology and design, as well as a rationale for my choice. A qualitative methodology and multiple case study design were chosen to explore strategies some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. Furthermore, I described the participants, population, sampling strategy, data collection instruments and technique, a method for data organization, ethical considerations, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

A sample of five managers of nonfranchised restaurants was justified. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using NVivo software and content analysis. Ethical considerations are addressed using pseudonyms, informed consent, and researcher reflexivity. Finally, reliability and validity are enhanced through member checking and providing an audit trail. In section 3, I presented the data analysis procedures, results of the study, interpretation of the results, implications for social change, recommendations for action and social change, reflections, and conclusion of the study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

My purpose in this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that some nonfranchise restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training. Four major themes emerged during data analysis to indicate the employee training strategies participants implemented to improve customer satisfaction. The four major themes were (a) continuous, on-the-job training is the most frequently used training method; (b) manager observations and customer feedback indicate that effective training is focused on service delivery; (c) training strategies are flexible enough to address new issues as they emerge, and (d) hiring and enforcement strategies are utilized to address the challenge of employee noncompliance.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question used to guide this study was: What strategies do nonfranchise restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training? The population included five managers of nonfranchise restaurants who have improved customer satisfaction through effective training. The nonfranchise restaurants were located in central Delaware and had business longevity of 5 years or more.

De-identified, I imported verbatim transcripts of participants' semistructured interviews into NVivo software for directed content analysis. I used interview questions to define the preliminary, deductive categories to direct the content analysis. In NVivo, the preliminary categories were represented by nine nodes, each of which I labeled with one of the nine interview questions. I assigned participants' responses inductive subcategories of the interview question categories. Each subcategory was a code.

The codes were formed during data analysis by identifying excerpts from participants' responses that expressed a meaning relevant to answering the overarching research question. Then, I assigned relevant response excerpts to a subnode under the appropriate interview question node. The subnode was labeled with a brief, descriptive phrase to indicate the meaning of the data assigned. When different transcript excerpts expressed similar meanings, I assigned them to the same code.

If any participant's response to an interview question had been relevant to addressing the overarching research question but not to the interview question that elicited it, it either would have been placed under the interview question it was relevant to address, or a new, I would have created an inductive category for it. However, the semistructured interview format was effective for maintaining a focus on the questions' topics. Table 2 indicates the preliminary categories corresponding to the interview questions and the inductive codes developed during the coding phase of the analysis.

Table 2

Directed Content Analysis Categories and Inductive Subcategories

Directed content analysis category (numbered in the order of the corresponding interview questions) Inductive subcategory	*n* of participants contributing (*N*=5)	*n* of response excerpts included
Question 1. Effective training topics	5	6
Being proactive	2	2
Courtesy and politeness	3	3
Quality food products	1	1
Question 2. Practices for measuring training impacts	5	5
Customer and employee feedback	2	2
Customer feedback and sales	3	3
Question 3. Key training issues of greatest interest to employees	4	4
Best ways to manage unsatisfied customers	2	2
How to make more money	2	2
Question 4. Training methods used	5	17
Clear communication of expectations	1	2
Customer is always right	1	2
Formal training	1	1
On-the-job training	5	12
Question 5. Indicators that a change in training may be necessary	5	8
Customers tell us	4	4
Employee complacency	2	2
Employee observations	1	1
Observation of multiple employees struggling	1	1
Question 6. Types of continuous training used	5	12
Continuous on-the-job training	5	12
Question 7. Challenges encountered during training	5	5
Building a shared understanding with employees	2	2
Building a team that truly cares	3	3

Question 8. Barriers to ensuring guideline compliance	5	8
Employee inconsistency in compliance	4	4
No barriers encountered	2	2
Performance in training versus performance on the job	1	2
Question 9. How new issues are addressed	5	7
Addressing new issues on an as-needed basis	5	5
Introducing new rules and regulations	1	2

In the theming phase of the analysis, I reviewed the data in the deductive categories and inductive codes to identify themes that represented overarching patterns of meaning in participants' responses. Themes were formed inductively by grouping categories that converged on a larger theme according to the meanings of the inductive codes included in them. During this phase, I named the themes that emerged to indicate their significance as answers to the research question. Table 3 indicates the themes and the deductive categories grouped to form them.

Table 3

Data Analysis Themes

Category grouped to form theme Theme	*n* of participants contributing ($N = 5$)	*n* of response excerpts included
Responses indicating training methods used (Question 4)	5	10
Responses indicating types of continuous training used (Question 6)	5	7
Theme 1: Continuous, on-the-job training is the most frequently used training method	5	17
Responses indicating effective training topics (Question 1)	5	6
Responses indicating key training issues of greatest interest to employees (Question 3)	4	4
Responses indicating practices for measuring training impacts (Question 2)	5	5
Theme 2: Manager observations and customer feedback indicate that effective training is focused on service delivery	5	15
Responses indicating how new issues are addressed (Question 9)	5	7
Responses indicating how the need for a change in training is recognized (Question 5)	5	8
Theme 3: Training strategies are flexible enough to address new issues as they emerge	5	15
Responses indicating barriers to ensuring guideline compliance (Question 8)	5	8
Responses indicating challenges encountered during training (Question 7)	5	5
Theme 4: Hiring and enforcement strategies are utilized to address the challenge of employee noncompliance	5	13

I organized the remainder of this presentation of findings by theme. The discussion of each theme includes evidence for the findings in the form of direct quotes from the data. The five participants are designated with alphanumeric codes (P1 through P5) to maintain confidentiality. Also included in the discussion of each theme are references to previous theoretical and empirical literature that the finding confirms, disconfirms, or extends. As discussed in Section 1, Parasuraman et al.'s (1988) service quality theory (SERVQUAL) was used in this study to better understand training strategies for improving customer satisfaction. SERVQUAL theory indicates that service quality is the customer's enduring, overall perception of the service a business provides, whereas customer satisfaction is assessed concerning single transactions (Parasuraman et al., 1988).

There are multiple models of measurement associated with SERVQUAL. In this study, I adopted the three-component model of Rust and Oliver (1994) with SERVQUAL as the foundation. The three-component model involves reviewing the service product, delivery, and environment to determine service quality (Rust & Oliver, 1994). The three-component model is referenced in the following presentation of the themes as a conceptual framework to interpret the findings.

Theme 1: Continuous, on-the-Job Training Is the Most Frequently Used Training Method

This theme was identified in participants' responses to interview questions 4 and 6. The findings indicated that all participants preferred to train employees on the job and on an ongoing basis to improve customer satisfaction. Participants reported that they made themselves available to answer employee questions and to address new issues as they arose and that guiding employees through real-world situations and challenges was more effective than formal training to convey general guidelines.

P1 stated that no formal training was utilized to improve customer satisfaction and that the relevant training instead took place on the job: “We do not have particular days that we designated as training days. I like to train on the spot when needed. My business is set up based on ongoing training.” In describing how their business conducts on-the-job training to improve customer satisfaction, P1 stated that it consisted in part of frequent reminders of key strategies: “I continuously remind employees of requirements such as food preparedness and how to greet customers.” Businesses also used customer feedback to guide training, as P1 indicated in describing the training as “refreshed as often as our customers demand based on feedback.”

P2 described on-the-job training as the most effective when it involved manager availability and responsiveness, particularly for new employees. P2 stated, “When new employees come in, you stay close to them and make sure that they know your expectations and communicate.” The on-the-job training strategy in the nonfranchise restaurant differed from the more structured format typically used in franchises, P2 said: “It’s different in this setting because when I was in a corporate restaurant, we had a more structured training. In this setting, we employ on-the-job training and then revisit throughout the course of an employee’s employment.” In providing a high-level overview of how management conducts on-the-job training to improve customer satisfaction, P2 said, “You show [the employee] how to do it, you let them do it, and then we do it together to make sure that you have it." P2 emphasized that ongoing, on-the-job training was informal but also systematic in adhering to a structured procedure: "A more comprehensive look at our training would show that it's a three-step process. We train you, let you practice the newly acquired training, and then follow-up to make sure you have no questions."

Like P2, P3 had experience with both the formal training in franchises and the informal, ongoing, on-the-job approach. Based on the experience of both strategies, P3 preferred the on-the-job method in a nonfranchise restaurant context: "When I first started, I took the cooperate approach and utilized a handbook with established customer satisfaction training procedures. As time went by, I noticed that the most effective way to train was on-the-job training." P3 reported that the on-the-job strategy was preferred because a one-size-fits-all approach required excessive tailoring to local conditions: "While the pamphlets were great, they are not designed for different customers based on different regions. I had to adjust to make the training more conducive for my region." P3 encouraged employees to seek formal certifications, but within the nonfranchise restaurant, training remained continual and on-the-job: "I employ on-the-job training that is used every day. I also encourage my staff to seek additional certification within the restaurant industry that may augment their training. However, on-the-job training is my go-to training method."

P4 said of the training strategy used to improve customer satisfaction, "This would be considered on-the-job-training." P4's training strategy was based on the more general practice of leading by example: "I am a hands-on person, so how I train my colleagues is simple. Let's work together and help one another in whatever is needed to be done. I ask if anyone needs help with things. I also ask what I can do better to help." The manager conducted the training per their availability and responsiveness, P4 added, saying that the strategy was based on, "Being prompt and explaining everything [employees] need to know and receiving feedback. That lets me know my trainee is paying attention."

P5 stated that training to ensure employee compliance with safety protocols was formal, while training to improve customer satisfaction was "hands-on training using the on-the-job approach." P5 added that the on-the-job training did not follow a set procedure but was based on managers' responsiveness to observed opportunities for employee improvement: "We do not have a formal continuous training program. We just monitor employees' status and train on the spot, if needed."

Theme 1 confirmed the findings of previous researchers by indicating that participants perceived employee training as necessary for improving customer satisfaction. Several researchers have emphasized training and the development of employees as necessary for meeting the needs of modern customers (Arroyo-Lopez et al., 2016; Chien-Jung, 2017; Voon, 2017). In the restaurant setting specifically, employee training on service quality is effective for improving customer satisfaction (Diab et al., 2016; Villanueva, 2017; Wang et al., 2018). Findings in this study confirmed that employee training to improve customer satisfaction was effective when it was continuous, on-the-job, and focused on service quality.

Findings in this study further indicated that the focus of effective employee training was not distributed evenly across all components of service quality. In the three-component model used as the conceptual framework for this study, Rust and Oliver (1994) identified service product, delivery, and the environment as the three components of service quality. Findings in this study indicated that continuous, on-the-job employee training was most effective in improving customer satisfaction when a business focuses on the service delivery component of service quality. This finding is the subject of Theme 2.

Theme 2: Manager Observations and Customer Feedback Indicate That Effective Training is Focused on Service Delivery

This theme emerged from participants' responses to interview Questions 1, 2, and 3. Participants indicated in relation to Theme 1 that the training method they used most frequently was continuous, on-the-job training. In data associated with Theme 2, participants indicated that the topic of the on-job-training was service delivery rather than service product or environment. Participants indicated that they placed the highest priority on service delivery because their assessments of training impact indicated that this focus was the most effective in improving customer satisfaction. Participants further indicated that the prioritization of service delivery as a training focus was the reason for their utilization of the continuous, on-the-job training method.

All five participants stated that service delivery was the primary focus of their employee training because it had the most significant effect on customer satisfaction. P5 stated, "The most important part towards customer satisfaction is customer service. If you provide great customer service, there should be a good chance that customers will return." P1 expressed the same perception in stating, "The most important thing is how often we seek customers' approval. While training, we tell [employees] to focus more on customer needs than anything else." P3 stated that ongoing training to improve customer satisfaction was focused on service delivery quality because "Customer satisfaction is hinged on good customer service."

This finding was consistent with previous researchers who concluded that food industry customers are no longer solely interested in the food and in the overall experience of dining out as a luxury (Cheng et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016). Restaurants are part of the service industry, making customer satisfaction in restaurant settings more dependent on service delivery quality (Chien-Jung, 2017). Client-employee interaction quality has been identified as the most significant factor influencing overall service quality and customer satisfaction in recreational service industries (Cheung & Woo, 2016).

Participants assessed that a training focus on service delivery quality effectively improved customer satisfaction through their own observations, sales, and customer feedback, which they obtained by interacting with customers and observing the amounts of the tips employees received. P1 stated, "We measure our training methods by customer feedback and sales." P5 referred to monitoring tipping amounts in stating, "[Training impact] is clearly measured by returned customers and employees' tips." P3 obtained feedback from customers in person and online: "I pay attention to my website to see feedback that customers left. I solicit feedback from our business page and customers as they arrive and leave my business. This is the best way to measure our training practices.” P2 also referred to soliciting feedback from customers by maintaining an open channel of communication: “It’s important to always have an open dialog with employees and the guest to make sure we’re effectively listening to what is going on in our establishment. This is step one to ensure we are meeting the customers’ needs.”

Participants trained employees to provide a high quality of service delivery by focusing on the SERVQUAL dimensions of empathy and responsiveness. Empathy is the level of caring and individualized service given to customers (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017). Participants reported that they trained employees to provide individualized service that made customers feel cared for. P3 stated: “[Employees] must take time to make [customers] feel special which they may share with others who may eventually visit your establishment.” P3 said of specific ways in which employees were trained to show empathy to customers: “Factors that can contribute to that are greeting customers as they enter, being polite, being courteous and just make your customers feel like you’re happy to see them.” P1 also identified empathy as a training priority in stating,

> Politeness is an important training topic for my employees. We are a very small company, so it’s important to treat our customers like we would want to be treated. We want our customers to understand that when they come to our restaurant, they are family.

P2 indicated the importance of empathy in improving customer satisfaction in stating, “The more engaged you are with a customer, the more satisfied they are.” P4 trained employees to provide empathetic consideration to customers through “how we greet our guest to ensure they are happy and enjoying their visit.”

Participants’ focus on empathy in employee training to improve customer satisfaction confirmed the findings of previous researchers. Empathy is the SERVQUAL dimension that past researchers have most frequently recommended as a focus for employee training (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). The importance of empathy has been confirmed in both fast-food (Adeinat, 2019; Wang et al., 2018) and fine-dining settings (Shahzadi et al., 2018). Researchers have argued that businesses should train employees to provide individualized service to make customers feel their individual needs are met and that doing so increases customer satisfaction (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Although these researchers recognized the value of other SERVQUAL dimensions, empathy was identified as having the largest effect on customer satisfaction (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018).

Responsiveness as a SERVQUAL dimension refers to the willingness of employees to aid customers, respond to customers’ needs, and provide swift and efficient services (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017). P1 identified responsiveness as a central focus of employee training to improve customer satisfaction:

> "I train our employees to always ask how the food tastes and do [customers] need anything. If there is a problem, it becomes all hands on deck to try to resolve the issue. Out of seven years, I've only had two complaints that had anything to do about customer service."

P4 alluded to responsiveness as a training focus in stating that management taught employees that "No matter what, the customer is always right." P3 referred to the application of responsiveness in addressing customer complaints, adding that demonstrating responsiveness effectively in instances of customer dissatisfaction was a topic that interested employees: "My employees were the most concerned with how to deal with unsatisfied customers. They would like to understand how to deal with customers, even when [customers] are wrong. What actions should they take to defuse any uncomfortable situation?"

Relating Theme 2 to the three-component model of Rust and Oliver (1994) illuminated a key pattern in participants' responses. Participants consistently indicated that ongoing, on-the-job training was needed to improve service delivery, whereas formal, time-limited training was sufficient for ensuring service product and environment quality. In contrast to the ongoing, on-the-job training described in relation to Theme 1, P4 reported the use of one-time, formal training to ensure compliance with employee licensure requirements related to product safety, stating that it consisted of "having training class and recertifications done, staying on top of any type of license our employees need." As a further example, P1 conducted formal, regularly recurring refreshers on health and safety standards for service product and environment quality:

"Once a month, we have training on different sections of the health and safety booklet to meet regulatory guidelines."

Participants' responses suggested why they perceived formal, time-limited training as adequate for ensuring quality in relation to service products and the environment. In discussing the standards for service product quality, P3 cited the example of a specific, prescribed criterion: "You must make sure you are providing a good product. If they order fried chicken, cabbage, and mac and cheese, make sure you give the customer that and not something different." Thus, the business assessed the quality of the product in this example according to whether the customer received what they ordered. Managers could reasonably expect that employees would be able to meet this standard without significant discretion or social problem-solving, given that the procedures for preparing the menu selections did not vary substantially between orders.

Participants also made assessments of service product quality concerning safety according to specific, prescribed criteria. P1 cited the following example of a standard for service product safety: "We must ensure the customer's food remains above 135 degrees by the time it gets to the table." In this example, the standard was precise and consistent, so employees did not need to use discretion and problem-solving to reconcile specific conditions with an abstract goal. P1 also described precise, prescribed standards for assessing service environment quality, stating that the goal was sterilization according to formalized standards and procedures: "We continue to ensure our employees are up-to-date on all training that is regulated by the industry and keep our place clean utilizing sterilization practices." Thus, service environment and product quality were assessed according to specific, prescribed standards that remained consistent across situations.

Therefore, standards for service product and environment quality differed significantly from participants' primary standard for service delivery quality, which was customer satisfaction. Previous researchers have found that the specific service quality required to meet the general standard of customer satisfaction can vary significantly according to individual customers' perceptions and expectations (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Ding & Keh, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017; Wolf & Zhang, 2016). Thus, specific standards for employee behavior in service delivery will vary between customers, but assessing and meeting those standards is critical to improving customer satisfaction. In a study on fine-dining restaurants, Garg and Amelia (2016) found that customers paid more attention to employees' behaviors, body language, tone of voice, and provision of individualized attention than to any other components of service quality. The employee behaviors that Garg and Amelia (2016) identified as having the greatest impact on customer satisfaction are associated with the SERVQUAL dimensions of responsiveness and empathy (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018).

In this study, participants' observations and customer feedback confirmed the importance of customer service training towards improving customer satisfaction. Specifically, the findings indicated that employee training to improve customer satisfaction was most effective when focused on service delivery quality in the SERVQUAL dimensions of empathy and responsiveness. The findings extended those of previous researchers by indicating that employees could not be effectively trained to demonstrate empathy and responsiveness toward customers through formal, time-limited training that conveyed general guidelines in this study's settings. The most effective employee training strategy for improving customer satisfaction, as indicated by participants, was ongoing, on-the-job training focused specifically on empathy and responsiveness.

Theme 3: Training Strategies Are Flexible Enough to Address New Issues as They Emerge

This theme was identified in participants' responses to interview questions 5 and 9. All five participants indicated that employee training strategies to improve customer satisfaction were most effective when they were flexible enough to address new needs as these arose. Participants assessed a need to adjust to training strategies according to their own observations, employee feedback, and customer feedback.

All five participants emphasized the importance of customer feedback to indicate that a change to training might be needed. P1 said, "We let our customers tell us through sales and feedback if our training is no longer relevant and requires changing." P2 stated, "We let our customers tell us when a change is needed." To solicit the relevant feedback, P2 said, "I go talk to the guests when I can, to see how was their dining experience, what can we do better, and the things that we did great." P2 began addressing customer feedback when: "I communicate that information back to our employees." P3 also relied on customer feedback to assess when a change to training strategies was needed: "A quick assessment of my training is customer feedback. Dissatisfied customers come with the job, but we strive to not have many." Negative feedback could indicate the need for a change in training, P3 said: "If I notice many negative comments and my employees are struggling with handling them, that is a good indicator that additional or new training methods should be adopted." P5 also described customer dissatisfaction as a key indicator that new training was needed: "The most important indicator is customers. If customers are responding negatively to trained techniques employed by staff, a change in training may be warranted."

Participants also referenced employee feedback in assessing a need for a change to training. P2 spoke of acting on patterns in employee reports: "If multiple employees provide feedback from customers that required attention, we may conduct that training." P4 stated that employees provided feedback about one another's performance in relation to customer satisfaction: "These factors [indicating customer dissatisfaction] can be observed by coworkers, which would indicate that the employee didn't understand the value of the training or he or she don't care." P5 also cited employee feedback as a potential indicator that changes to training were needed: "If employees are telling you that it's time for a change based on what they are noticing, that may be an indicator that change is required." P5 also stated that observations of employees could indicate a need for a change to training: "If you're noticing multiple employees having a difficult time grasping the training techniques, then you may need to adjust or maybe just modernize your training."

Participants' approach to determining how training should be changed to address a need was collaborative. After participants conveyed customer feedback to staff, they would hold open discussions with employees to determine how training should be modified. P3 actively sought input from employees when reevaluating training strategies: "I encourage ideas from my staff and will always listen and implement new ideas if it's applicable. All I ask is for my employees to come up with a plan and help me understand the problem." P4 described having sit-down sessions with employees to develop new training strategies to improve customer satisfaction: "If something occurs that wasn't discussed about customer satisfaction, learning a new issue and how we can fix it, we have a sit-down and go over what we can do to fix the issue to implement in our training."

Theme 3 was consistent with Themes 1 and 2 in indicating the importance of training in service delivery to improve customer satisfaction. Theme 3 also reinforced the finding in Themes 1 and 2 that continuous, on-the-job training was the most effective strategy for training employees in service delivery because that strategy enabled fast, flexible responses to new issues. Within the framework of SERVQUAL, Theme 3 may be interpreted as a confirmation of the importance of empathy and responsiveness (Adeinat, 2019; Bhuian, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Vryoni et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018), and as extending the SERVQUAL framework by confirming the importance of empathy and responsiveness in the context of nonfranchise restaurants, where it had not previously been tested.

Theme 4: Hiring and Enforcement Strategies Are Utilized to Address the Challenge of Employee Noncompliance

All five participants reported that employee noncompliance was the most salient challenge to employee training in service delivery and improving customer satisfaction. P1 provided a partly discrepant response in indicating that although employee noncompliance was the most salient challenge, it was not a significant barrier. Participants reported that they used two strategies to overcome the barrier of employee noncompliance with training. First, they attempted to hire only individuals who they assessed as amenable to complying with training. Second, according to clear guidelines, participants enforced compliance through escalating consequences, beginning with reminders and potentially ending with termination of chronically noncompliant employees.

Participants described employee noncompliance as either active and deliberate or a result of indifference. P5 referred to active resistance in stating, “People who think they know everything and push back on training, that is the biggest barrier that I’ve seen.” P3 also referred to deliberate noncompliance in stating that some employees preferred to use their own discretion instead of complying with training: “Some people fail to understand that this is my business, and they cannot just do things their way.” P4 alluded to employee resistance in stating that the most salient challenge to training compliance was, “People not agreeing on some things.”

Although employee resistance was likely to manifest as soon as expectations were relayed, participants indicated, noncompliance resulting from passive indifference was likely to develop and increase over time if not checked. P2 stated, “People become complacent. I’ve noticed that when people have been working someplace for a long time, they think they know everything and stop relying on training practices that were instilled in them at the beginning of their employment." However, even employees interested in complying could struggle when applying training in practice, P1 stated: "It's easy to train individuals on past experiences to help them prepare for difficult customers they may run into. However, it's another thing to see how employees react once they're experiencing the situation."

The first strategy participants utilized to overcome the barrier of noncompliance was to preempt it by only hiring employees they assessed as willing and able to comply. P3 cited empathy for customers as a predisposition to seek in potential employees: "You need to hire employees that care about customers and realize that customer satisfaction is the single most important component towards success." P4 referred to hiring practices in stating, "Building the perfect team to train thoroughly is key" to ensuring compliance. P2 attempted to hire employees who were assessed as driven to succeed: "[Some] people have dreams and the desires to find out what drives them toward excellence. Not having that drive makes it difficult to train people in a way that they would stay motivated without the consent praises."

The second strategy participants utilized was the enforcement of training compliance. Enforcing compliance depended on clearly communicating expectations, participants indicated. P3 stated, "I have very strict guidelines on how my employees should act, and it is my expectation that they abide by those guidelines." P5 offered a similar response in stating, "There are established guidelines that must be followed."

When participants became aware of employee noncompliance, the lowest level of enforcement they reported was a gentle reminder. P1 stated: “If I notice any one of my employees not following training policies, I just simply remind them of the training and perhaps retrain if needed.” Retraining was employed when reminders did not lead to compliance, as P1 suggested. P4 also utilized retraining that involved rehearsing compliance for manager verification: “After your training is complete, you must be validated, meaning greeting a manager and going through the proper steps to start on the floor with two tables. If not validated, you will receive more training.” The strongest form of enforcement was termination; P5 indicated: “If the employee in question cannot conform to accepting our training policies, they are eventually let go.”

Consistent with previous themes, participants indicated in relation to their hiring practices that they attempted to hire only employees they assessed as likely to demonstrate the SERVQUAL dimensions of empathy and responsiveness toward customers or assessed as driven enough to comply with those training foci in order to succeed. Current employees were disciplined or terminated if they did not demonstrate those dimensions following their training. This finding added a significant, additional dimension to findings of the effectiveness of flexible, continuous, on-the-job training focused on service delivery through empathy and responsiveness. Theme 4 suggested that these training strategies were more likely to result in improved customer satisfaction when managers also utilized a complementary strategy of creating and maintaining a staff with the aptitude and motivation necessary to assimilate and apply the training. Thus, participants did not perceive their training strategies to improve customer satisfaction effectively in improving service delivery quality sufficiently in any employee. This finding confirmed literature indicating that employees' psychological attributes are vital in improving service quality and that employees who face customers daily should be emotionally stable and motivated (Voon, 2017).

This finding was consistent with other themes in this study and with the literature indicating that service delivery quality was determined by different conditions than service product and environment quality. Participants in this study reported no challenges or barriers related to employee noncompliance with the specific, prescribed product and environment quality standards they could convey through formal, time-limited training. Consistent with literature indicating that service delivery quality standards varied by customer and situation and that empathy and responsiveness toward customers depended on employee aptitude and buy-in (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Garg & Amelia, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017), participants associated the challenge and barrier of employee noncompliance only with service delivery quality. Consistent with literature indicating that empathy and responsiveness are the service quality dimensions with the greatest influence on customer satisfaction (Adeinat, 2019; Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Vryoni et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018), participants identified barriers to employees' demonstrating those dimensions in compliance with training as the most salient barrier to improving customer satisfaction through employee training.

Applications to Professional Practice

Effective strategies to promote customer retention are critical for businesses because they are strongly associated with increased profits and reduced costs (Itzkowitz, 2013; Terziev et al., 2017). Specifically, in the restaurant industry, when customer retention increases by 5%, a restaurant's profits can increase by 25% (Pettijohn et al., 1997). In turn, customer retention is directly related to employees' strategies to ensure a high level of customer satisfaction (Murali et al., 2016). The participants' results have suggested that employee training strategies for improving customer satisfaction by nonfranchise restaurant managers are effective. There is potential to improve business practice by suggesting potentially effective training strategies to improve customer satisfaction, potentially leading to a long-term return in the form of retained customers and increased profit.

The employee training strategies described are relevant to business practice because new customers are expensive to find and reach. New customers usually purchase 10% fewer products than existing customers, and they are less engaged in the buying process than existing customers (Alshurideh, 2016). Strategies to increase customer satisfaction, and the resulting increase in customer retention, are therefore relevant for assisting practitioners in lowering the significant costs associated with acquiring new customers, as well as the significant lost revenues associated with customer turnover (Min et al., 2016; Qin & Prybutok, 2009). Strategies that may significantly increase profits and lower customer acquisition costs are particularly relevant in the restaurant industry, where competition for customers is likely to be intense (Gao et al., 2018; Pettijohn et al., 1997).

The most significant applicability of the findings in this study with respect to the professional practice of business is in the description of training strategies that have been effective in improving customer satisfaction, specifically in nonfranchise restaurants. Arroyo-Lopez et al. (2016) recommended that training strategies should be based on a situational diagnosis of customers' needs as well as the restaurants' goals, and researchers have noted the need for strategies adapted to meet customer expectations that vary according to restaurant type (Cha & Borchgrevink, 2019; Hanks et al., 2017). Researchers have conducted few studies to provide information concerning strategies nonfranchise restaurant managers have used to train employees to improve customer satisfaction. Part of the relevance of the findings in this study to business practice is that they may serve as suggestions to managers of training strategies that have been effective specifically in the context of nonfranchise restaurants.

One way the findings in this study are relevant to business practice in nonfranchise relevance is that they indicated a focus on training. There are ten dimensions of service quality identified in the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), and Rust and Oliver's (1994) model defines three components of service quality. Researchers have not reached a consensus about which dimensions should receive the most attention in employee training. Specifically, researchers do not yet agree on which of the associated SERVQUAL dimensions (empathy, responsiveness, and assurance) have the strongest influence on customer satisfaction in relation to service delivery.

Empathy (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018), responsiveness (Nguyen et al., 2018), and assurance (Diab et al., 2016) have each been identified by some researchers as the factor that should form the focus of training. Although the lack of researcher consensus might make a training strategy with an equal focus on all relevant or potentially relevant service quality dimensions and components seem advisable at first, restaurant managers and employees are required to respond rapidly and effectively to emerging challenges in a dynamic environment (Gao et al., 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2017).

The findings in this study contributed to addressing this lack of consensus in the literature by indicating specific foci and methods for effective training to improve customer satisfaction in the business context of nonfranchise restaurants. The findings suggested that training in this context may be most effective at increasing customer satisfaction when focused on empathy and responsiveness. The findings further suggested that the most effective strategy for delivering training on empathy and responsiveness is continuous, on-the-job training, as opposed to formal, time-limited training. These findings are potentially relevant for guiding and focusing critical employee training in a nonfranchise restaurant context, where time is at a premium, there is little room for error, and new challenges may arise at any time (Gao et al., 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2017). The Recommendations for Action subsection identifies the specific training strategies recommended for implementation to meet the requirements of customer satisfaction in a nonfranchise restaurant context.

Implications for Social Change

The findings in this study have positive implications for two broadly related areas of social change. First, the findings in this study may be of assistance to nonfranchise restaurant managers in improving customer satisfaction, thereby improving the potential for customer retention, and increasing profits (Murali et al., 2016; Pettijohn et al., 1997; Sorescu & Sorescu, 2016). A profitable restaurant benefits its community because it is more likely to remain in business, providing employment opportunities for workers, tax revenues, and positive dining experiences.

The positive social changes associated with increased customer satisfaction and the associated increase in business profitability is potentially great. Organizational leaders lose millions of dollars annually because of low customer satisfaction (Ortman, 2017). By one estimate, company profits could increase by 224% if organizational leaders focused more on improving customer satisfaction (Sorescu & Sorescu, 2016). Specifically, in the restaurant industry, an incremental improvement in customer satisfaction can increase profitability by multiple increments (Pettijohn et al., 1997). Training strategies that are informal, on-the-job, and continuous require few resources, and that such strategies are the most effective for improving customer satisfaction in a nonfranchise restaurant context. The potential for large profit increases resulting from increased customer satisfaction (Pettijohn et al., 1997; Sorescu & Sorescu, 2016) suggests that the training strategies described in this study may be a low-cost way for investments in training to have disproportionately large effects on the positive social consequences of nonfranchise restaurant profitability.

Recommendations for Action

The recommendations for the action described in this section are for the consideration of nonfranchise restaurant managers. They may be distributed through online forums and professional associations for members of this population. The first recommendation for practice is that training to increase customer satisfaction, businesses should focus on empathy for and responsiveness to customers. The training focused on empathy should be directed toward the goal of providing individualized attention to meet customer expectations. Specific methods recommended in the literature for demonstrating empathy include remembering customers' names, anticipating customers' needs, and providing individualized service to make customers feel that they are individually cared for (Adeinat, 2019; Shahzadi et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2018). Consistent with that literature, findings in this study indicated that training on the topic of empathy should focus on making customers feel special through individualized attention and care, and making customers feel that they are welcome and that restaurant staff is happy to see them through appropriate, enthusiastic greetings and continuing attentiveness.

In the literature, responsiveness is defined as the willingness of employees to aid customers, respond to customers' needs, and provide swift and efficient services (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017). Consistent with this literature, findings in this study indicated that training on the topic of responsiveness was focused on politeness, defusing instances of customer dissatisfaction, checking periodically with customers to see if they needed anything, soliciting feedback from customers on food and service quality, and deferring to customer perceptions and expectations ("the customer is always right," as P3 and P5 stated).

Based on the present study's findings, I recommend that training focused on empathy and responsiveness be ongoing and on-the-job rather than formal and time-limited. This recommendation is consistent with descriptions in the literature of the restaurant business as complex, fast-paced, and dynamic (Gao et al., 2018; Jalilvand et al., 2017), suggested the effectiveness of immediate, focused, on-the-spot training to address service delivery deficits or novel situations. This recommendation is also consistent with literature indicating that general guidelines are of limited use in meeting the unpredictably varied expectations of individual customers (Bhuian, 2016; Diab et al., 2016; Ding & Keh, 2016; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Pongpanich & Fernando, 2019; Razak et al., 2016; Vryoni et al., 2017; Wolf & Zhang, 2016).

Specific recommendations based on the findings in this study are that managers can beneficially observe employees and solicit customer and employee feedback in order to offer reminders and retraining on specific aspects of service delivery at need. Managers can also beneficially work on a hands-on, collaborative basis with employees to provide guidance on the spot. Managers may also improve the effectiveness of training by making themselves available and approachable for answering employee questions about how to handle specific situations that are in progress or types of situations that have proven problematic over time.

Recommendations for Further Research

Recommendations for future research are offered based on the study limitations described in Section I of this study. Acting on these recommendations contributed to the applicability of the findings in this study to business practice by confirming or refining them to allow practitioners to implement them more confidently in a wider variety of contexts. The first limitation was the generalizability of the results, a consequence of the methodological limitation that qualitative findings grounded in and inseparable from specific perspectives and contexts cannot be generalizable. To facilitate the generalizability of the findings in this study, I recommended that they be confirmed or disconfirmed by administering a validated quantitative questionnaire instrument to a sample of sufficient size to support generalizability to the population.

The second limitation of this study was the transferability of the findings to other settings and populations. This limitation resulted from the delimitation of the study scope to a small sample of nonfranchise restaurant managers in a small geographic area. It is recommended that this study be replicated with different target populations in different geographic areas to assess the extent of transferability.

The third limitation was associated with the data collection procedure, which resulted in the findings being reliant on the accuracy and honesty of participants' self-reports. Although identifying common themes across the sample mitigated the threat to credibility associated with this limitation, it is recommended that further research be conducted to confirm the findings through data from other sources. Specifically, I recommend that researchers conduct future qualitative multiple-case study research involving data collection through document reviews, researcher observations of restaurant operations, interviews with customers, and interviews with employees.

The fourth limitation discussed in Section 1 was the threat to confirmability associated with the potential for researcher bias to influence the data and findings. This limitation was a consequence of the qualitative methodology used in this study. Quantitative research, in which the objectivity of data collection and analysis procedures can be verified, is recommended to confirm whether the findings in this study hold true when the limitation associated with the potential for researcher bias to influence them is removed.

Reflections

The DBA Doctoral Study process has challenged me mentally, emotionally, and physically. I was never emerged within the restaurant sector and lacked enough information to formulate a perception that would skew my research. Not knowing much about the restaurant sector made this research exciting. It allowed me to apply newly acquired skills to answer a question, what strategies do nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training.

Initially, my thought was that if managers employ the customers are always right, theory, it would improve customer satisfaction. Completing this research has brought forth valuable information that explains why saying customers are always right is far from the actual practice managers adopt to satisfy their customers. The doctoral process has taught me to value and seek input from multiple sources. I have also gained an appreciation of the interview process and understand why that is the most critical part of any study.

Conclusion

Four major themes emerged during data analysis to indicate the employee training strategies participants implemented to improve customer satisfaction. The four major themes were: (a) continuous, on-the-job training is the most frequently used training method; (b) manager observations and customer feedback indicate that effective training is focused on service delivery; (c) training strategies are flexible enough to address new issues as they emerge, and; (d) hiring and enforcement strategies are utilized to address the challenge of employee noncompliance. These findings have suggested specific foci and methods for effective training to improve customer satisfaction in the business context of nonfranchise restaurants. Specifically, the findings suggested that training in this context may be most effective at increasing customer satisfaction when focused on the topics of empathy and responsiveness. The findings further suggested that the most effective strategy for delivering training on empathy and responsiveness is continuous, on-the-job training, as opposed to formal, time-limited training.

This study may contribute to the research gap regarding effective training strategies to improve customer satisfaction in a nonfranchise restaurant context. The findings were relevant to business practice in describing potentially effective strategies for guiding and focusing critical employee training in a nonfranchise restaurant context, where time is at a premium, there is little room for error, and new challenges may arise at any time. The recommended strategies have the potential to assist nonfranchise restaurant managers in improving customer satisfaction, thereby improving customer retention and increasing restaurant profits. A profitable restaurant benefits its community because it is more likely to remain in business, providing employment opportunities for workers, tax revenues, and positive dining experiences. The potential for large profit increases resulting from increased customer satisfaction suggests the potential for the training strategies described in this study to be an effective, low-cost way for small investments in training to have disproportionately large effects on those positive social consequences of nonfranchise restaurant profitability.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore strategies some nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through training.

Research Question

What strategies do nonfranchised restaurant managers use to improve customer satisfaction through appropriate staff training?

Are there any questions before we begin?

Interview Questions

1. Which training topics have proven to be effective in enhancing customer satisfaction?
2. How do you measure the effects of training to improve customer satisfaction?
3. What were the key issues employees were most interested in while being trained to improve customer satisfaction?
4. What training methods have you used to help employees improve customer satisfaction?
5. What may be an indication that a change in customer satisfaction training is necessary?
6. What type of continuous training programs do you use to maintain employees' training towards facilitating customer satisfaction improvement?
7. What challenges have occurred while training employees on strategies to improve customer satisfaction?

8. What barriers made it difficult to ensure employees follow training guidelines presented during training?
9. How do you address new issues that you may not have covered in initial employee training of strategies used to improve customer satisfaction?
10. What other comments would you like to share regarding the strategies used to train employees that resulted in improved customer satisfaction?

Debrief. Upon examination of the interview transcript, you will receive an e-mail advising the review was completed with or without questions. Once the research is complete, all participants will receive a summary of finding. Do you have any questions?

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you.