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Exploring Relationship Marketing Strategies for Increasing Student Retention in For-Profit, Online Higher Education

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

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Profit, Online Higher Education

by

Shirin Khosravian

MA, Southern New Hampshire University, 2017

BS, University of Maryland, 2003

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

For-profit, online, higher education institutions have lower student retention rates than institutions in other categories. Higher education leaders are concerned with low retention as it adversely impacts financial and student outcomes. Grounded in Morgan and Hunt's relationship marketing theory, the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study was to explore marketing strategies for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders use to increase student retention. Data were collected using semistructured interviews with five marketing leaders from three online, for-profit, higher education institutions in the United States and a review of social media posts and the institutions' websites. Four themes emerged from thematic data analysis: marketing strategies to increase student retention, online experience, key challenges, and retention value. The main recommendations that resulted from this study include (a) capturing student needs and developing personalized, customized experiences; (b) using strategies designed to engage the online customer; (c) aligning the company structure and resources to support a student-customer in an end-to-end experience, and (d) measure and understand the impact and value of student retention to business profits and revenue. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve the institution's financial stability and sustainability in the market and increase the number of graduates who could use their degrees for personal advancement and that of their communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family. Thank you to my parents, who made many sacrifices so my brothers and I could have a brighter future. To my mother, Simin, for caring for my young son while I worked full time and studied and whose prayers I never had to ask for. Thank you to my father, Ali Akbar, who taught me to be socially conscious. To my brothers, Ameen and Afsheen, who I am proud of, and my husband, James, who I admire and respect. To my son, Michael, my breath, my light, and my reason.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Company growth and sustainability in the service industry rely on loyal customers; therefore, higher education marketing leaders should recognize the importance of marketing strategies to engage and retain current students for financial stability and maintain a competitive advantage in a growing market. In this study, I explored marketing leaders' strategies to increase student retention. This section includes a discussion of the background of the problem, problem statement, conceptual framework, and purpose of implementing marketing strategies in for-profit, online higher education. In this section, I also provide the research question and interview questions used to explore this topic with for-profit, online, higher education marketing leader research participants. Finally, I describe the study's significance, research assumptions, and social impact before presenting an academic review of the extant literature on the topic.

Background of the Problem

Student retention continues to be an issue for online education institutions (Glazier & Harris, 2021). Many studies have been conducted on implementing marketing strategies to retain customers in the service industry; however, there is insufficient research on how marketing strategies can effectively retain students. Santos (2020) posited that attracting and enrolling prospective students is like other traditional business marketing practices, evident by the monetary investment made in marketing at for-profit higher education institutions. While significant investment is made in for-profit higher education marketing to attract new students, there is no substantial evidence to show

marketing investment towards retaining existing students. Furthermore, attracting a new customer is more expensive than retaining a current customer (Guilbault, 2018; Sleiman et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a financial benefit in investing marketing resources in customer retention.

Furthermore, while there is a significant body of research on student retention, there is less research on retention efforts specific to students enrolled in exclusively online programs. Retention rates in online education institutions were 20% lower than in nonprofit, campus-based, or public higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). In this study, I explored marketing strategies for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders use to increase student retention.

Problem and Purpose

The specific business problem was that some for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders in the United States lack marketing strategies to increase student retention. Therefore, I explored successful marketing strategies some for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders in the United States used to increase student retention.

Population and Sampling

I collected data from five purposefully sampled marketing leaders from three for-profit, online, higher education institutions in the United States. In semistructured interviews, participants provided in-depth responses regarding marketing strategies to increase student retention. The participants' responses were compared and analyzed to identify common themes. I also reviewed publicly available documents and information

from the higher education institutions, including social media posts and the institutions'
websites.

Nature of the Study

The three research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed (Saunders et
al., 2015). I selected the qualitative approach to explore marketing strategies to increase
student retention in for-profit, online, higher education institutions. Qualitative
researchers seek to understand what underlies the phenomenon under study (Cypress,
2018). In contrast, quantitative researchers measure the relationship between variables
using data and analytics (Saunders et al., 2015). Quantitative methods measure the
numerical difference in the data based on a standard (Yin, 2018). I did not use the
quantitative method because the relationship between variables was not measured. In the
mixed-method approach, the researcher uses both qualitative and quantitative methods in
the study (Saunders et al., 2015). The mixed-method approach could provide a researcher
with a diverse perspective (Saunders et al., 2015). I did not use the mixed-method
approach because the quantitative element was irrelevant to this study.

Of the possible qualitative research designs, such as ethnography phenomenology,
narrative, and case study, I chose a case study design. According to Yin (2018), one of
the ways researchers use a case study is to gain practical views of managers' operations
in an organization. The case study design focuses on boundaries over a period (Cypress,
2018). The case study approach helped me understand current relationship marketing
practices among marketing leaders in online higher education institutions. From a cultural
perspective, an ethnography is conducted to gather information from large populations

(Cypress, 2018). I did not use the ethnographic design because I did not seek to understand cultural aspects of the phenomenon. Using the narrative research design, researchers gather information from the subjects sharing their story related to the topic of study (Cypress, 2018). I did not use a narrative approach because I sought to understand strategies and not stories related to the topic of the study. Phenomenologists seek to conduct their study through the individuals' personal experiences (Saunders et al., 2015). I did not use the phenomenological design because the study was focused on business strategies and not the participants' personal experiences.

Research Question

What marketing strategies do some for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders in the United States use to increase student retention?

Interview Questions

I used the following interview questions to address the research question:

1. What marketing strategies do you use to retain students?

2. How do you test the effectiveness of your relationship marketing strategies to see what is working and what is not working?

3. What barriers did you encounter to using relationship marketing to retain existing students?

4. How did you overcome the barriers you encountered to implementing the relationship marketing strategies to retain existing students?

5. Describe your institution's marketing organization designed for prospective students?

6. Describe your institution's marketing organization designed for enrolled students?

7. What additional information can you provide on using marketing strategies to retain students?

Conceptual Framework

I used the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing developed by Morgan and Hunt (1994) as the conceptual framework. The following key concepts underlie the theory: (a) trust and commitment as critical mediating concepts to the antecedents, (b) relationship termination costs, (c) relationship benefits, (d) shared values, (e) communication, and (f) opportunistic behavior (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). In the theory, Morgan and Hunt explained the concepts used to develop long-lasting relationships with customers. Therefore, the relationship marketing theory was appropriate to use as the conceptual framework in this study to explore marketing strategies to increase student retention.

The logical connections between this theory and the nature of the current study included enabling me to identify, explore, and understand participants' means for identifying and understanding the core concepts of relationship marketing and student retention and expected it to allow me to adequately examine participants' perceptions and strategies related to using relationship marketing strategies to address student retention in online learning higher education institutions. I explored participants' perceptions and strategies to develop and maintain trust and commitment with students using the antecedents of the key mediating concepts. The outcomes of these concepts noted by

Morgan and Hunt (1994) influence a customer's (a) propensity to leave, (b) acquiescence, (c) cooperation, and (d) decision-making uncertainty.

Operational Definitions

I used the following specialized terms in this study:

Brand loyalty: When the customer often intends to purchase from the same brand because of a pleasant experience (Yeggn, 2021).

Customer satisfaction: A measure to determine or describe how a product or service meets a customer's expectations (Sleiman et al., 2021).

Online education (or distance education): A learning process that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously (Seaman et al., 2018).

Relationship marketing: This concept underscores the relationship with customers after the purchase is made (Yeggn, 2021). Relationship marketing aims to balance marketing efforts to win new customers and keep existing customers, making efforts to maintain customer relationships after the sale.

Student engagement: Determined by how deeply involved a student is in their institution's experience (Tight, 2020).

Switching cost: Costs a customer considers when changing suppliers, which can be financial or nonfinancial (Sheikh et al., 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Research assumptions are aspects found in any part of the study that is reasonably accepted (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). I made two assumptions in this study. The first assumption was that the participants had adequate experience as online higher education and marketing practitioners. The second assumption was that the participants had sufficient experience planning, developing, and executing marketing strategies to increase student retention.

Limitations

Study limitations are disadvantages in the research design that may affect the research results (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). For example, the limitation I identified was that the potential participants could be biased in their responses or may not have been forthcoming in providing all details because of the competitive nature of the for-profit, higher education industry.

Delimitations

Delimitations, also considered the boundaries of a case study, are the circumstances that fall within a case study, including the period the case is studied, groups, organizations, locations, or other related features (Yin, 2018). I identified two delimitations in this study. The first delimitation was that I narrowed the research population to only include marketing managers but not other university staff who play a role in increasing student retention. The second delimitation was that I only focused on

for-profit, and online institutions to understand the nuances of the outcomes and did not include nonprofit or campus-based institution types.

Significance of the Study

The value of this study is that it may provide a practical model for understanding strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online higher education. While online education is growing in popularity, institutional leaders face challenges retaining students (Guilbault, 2018; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Radovan, 2019). When students withdraw due to dissatisfaction with their university experience, this could negatively impact the university's reputation and revenue from new students. Therefore, for-profit, online educational marketing leaders seek to minimize student attrition to maximize profitability and growth for their organizations.

In this qualitative, multiple case study, I explored the strategies some marketing leaders at for-profit, online, higher education institutions use to increase student retention. Marketing leaders can apply techniques and concepts found in this study to improve student trust and commitment as well as promote loyalty and retention, enhancing their institution's financial stability and competitive advantage. The implications for social change from the outcomes of this study include for-profit, higher education institutions staying in business to continue providing accessible education to nontraditional, working adult students who retain and graduate. Hodgman (2018) described for-profit institutions as a growing, desirable market because of the curriculum, flexibility, and diverse degree options for nontraditional students. In turn, graduates will have increased career

opportunities to improve their personal wealth, development, dignity, and ability to contribute to their communities and the economy.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study, I explored the marketing strategies some for-profit, online education, marketing leaders in the United States used to increase student retention. In this subsection, I provide an exhaustive review of prior literature on the topic, consisting of key and recent research using the conceptual framework in the service industry, including the higher education sector. In a literature review, a researcher aims to provide context to how a study is related to prior research within the lens of the theoretical framework (Saunders et al., 2015). Education leaders seek retention strategies to gain a competitive advantage (Appuhamilage & Torii, 2019). In this literature review, I extend the relationship marketing constructs from customers' perspectives in traditional service industries, such as telecommunications, banking, and retail, to students in private, for-profit, online higher education.

Relationship marketing is the marketing activity that enables long-lasting relationships with customers (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). I reviewed marketing concepts, models, and past studies on the effects of relationship marketing on customer retention in various service industries. First, I reviewed the constructs of the trust-commitment theory of relationship marketing. Next, I overviewed the higher education industry, student retention, and the concept of students as customers. Finally, I examined student satisfaction, loyalty, and retention using relationship marketing constructs.

I begin the literature review by broadly examining marketing concepts and models, leading to the conceptual framework for the study. First, I provide an overview of relationship marketing using definitions, prior research, and theories with a focus on the commitment-trust theory by Morgan and Hunt (1994); the concepts within the theory, which are (a) relationship costs; (b) relationship benefits; (c) shared values; (d) communication; and (e) opportunistic behavior; and the outcomes, which are (a) acquiescence; (b) propensity to leave; (c) cooperation; (d) functional conflict; and (e) decision-making uncertainty. Next, I provide context and discuss prior studies that have evaluated relationship marketing activities as a tool to increase profitability in various service industries, such as banking, telecommunications, and hospitality. I also analyze the higher education industry market, retention trends, retention theory, online learning, students as customers, and relationship marketing concepts used in higher education. The section concludes with a summary of the literature review.

The search process for this literature review included the following keywords: *student retention, online higher education, relationship marketing, for-profit education, service marketing,* and *students as customers*. In addition, I searched the following databases for studies, theories, concepts, and recent industry data to support this study: Thoreau, Google Scholar, National Center for Education Statistics, Business Source Complete, Sage Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and Emerald Insight. The literature review includes 72 articles, 96% of which are peer-reviewed and 76% of which were published within 5 years of anticipated graduation (i.e., 2018–2022).

Relationship Marketing

The success or failure of an organization in achieving its goals depends on the marketing strategy applied (Pardiyono et al., 2022). Marketing concepts and definitions have evolved since the 1920s (Ringold & Weitz, 2007). The American Marketing Association, the largest community of marketing scholars and professionals with 36,000 members, defined marketing as a process where marketers plan to promote products and services exchanged with consumers and companies to meet their needs (Ringold & Weitz, 2007). Abedian et al. (2022) explained marketing as a method of developing consumer value-creation. Do and Vu (2020) described marketing as developing customer relationships and meeting their needs. A marketing mix is a method marketers use when planning and executing marketing to meet customer needs (Abedian et al., 2022; Do & Vu, 2020). The market is an important consideration in determining what marketing mix to use. The product, price, promotion, and place (4P) marketing mix model was developed by McCarthy (1978; (Abedian et al., 2022; Fraser-Arnott, 2020; Hossain et al., 2020). The product is what the business is selling in the buyer-seller transaction. Do and Vu explained that the product should be accessible to customers in the right place and at the right time, with enough supply to meet customer demands. The customer pays the price for the product, which can be both monetary and nonmonetary. The place is where the transactions occur in the buyer-seller relationship, and promotion refers to the methods used to communicate the product to the customer. To decide which marketing method is the most appropriate, marketers must consider the attributes of the business, including product and service, audience, and market.

As industries evolved, marketing concepts evolved to meet the consumer's needs. The 4P model developed for manufacturing industries where product exchange with consumers and businesses is tangible did not accommodate the needs of the service industry (Hossain et al., 2020). A service is considered an intangible exchange between a company and the consumer (Balci et al., 2019; Grönroos, 1997; Hossain et al., 2020; Qian et al., 2019). Booms and Bitner (1981) included three new Ps to the 4P model (i.e., people, process, and physical evidence), referred to as the 7P model or service marketing. The 7P marketing mix model addressed the marketing needs of the service industry. Vynogradova and Drokina (2020) also explained that while the 4P marketing mix is the most widely recognized marketing model, it does not account for the interactions, personalization, communication, and collaboration elements needed in the digital age. Therefore, marketing concepts that expand on the 4P model have since emerged.

Relationship marketing activities focus on the importance of relational exchanges between the company and the customer. Relationship marketing gained popularity in practice and research in the middle of the 1990s, and researchers have added more dimensions since then (Sleiman et al., 2021). Berry (1983) was the first to introduce relationship marketing to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships in the service industry. The author explained that relationship marketing is appropriate when a customer wants or needs the service more than once, and the customer has more than one option to obtain the service. Furthermore, companies were investing more in acquiring new customers than investing resources in maintaining current customers, which was inefficient. Berry asserted that attracting a new customer costs more than keeping an

existing one. This financial benefit to companies is why relationship marketing models continue to evolve.

A familiar concept in relationship marketing models is increasing benefits and reducing customer costs. Grönroos (1997) developed a theory of relationship marketing focused on increasing benefits and reducing costs to maintain a mutually satisfactory relationship. Like Homans's (1958) social exchange theory, Grönroos concluded that consumers and businesses base their decision or intention to use a product or service on evaluating the cost and benefit. Balci et al. (2019) asserted that by applying concepts from the social exchange theory, companies could strengthen customer relationships and increase satisfaction, resulting in loyalty. Rizal et al. (2020) opined that consumers interact with the business under the social exchange theory as they weigh costs and benefits, which is part of relationship development. Researchers and companies examine tangible and intangible costs and benefits that affect customer retention.

Companies recognize the need to build and maintain relationships with their customers to remain competitive. Rather (2019) explained that relationship marketing is essential in a challenging and competitive global market. Morgan and Hunt (1994) developed the commitment-trust relationship marketing theory, a comprehensive model for relationship marketing that built upon earlier theories to define the concepts that influence commitment and trust, considered central to relationship marketing success. Relationship marketing activities are based on decisions with long- versus short-term benefits and avoiding opportunistic behaviors that harm the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Trust and commitment are related because trust is key to developing

commitment in a relationship (Nora, 2019). Many researchers have studied the effects of the concepts within the commitment-trust theory on companies in the service sector. While applications of the theory's concepts may differ depending on the type of business, there is no evidence to refute that trust and commitment are critical factors to relationship success.

For companies in the service sector, the business value for using relationship marketing concepts lies in improved performance from their relationship with existing customers. Setyawan et al. (2019) posited that a company's performance indicates its financial viability, production, growth, satisfaction, competitive advantage, and market share. The attributes of the commitment-trust theory have been tested and proven in the service sector to enhance customer relationships.

The repeat purchasing of the brand's product is related to customers' trust and assurance in the value of the product or service (Amoako, 2019). Nora (2019) surveyed 195 customers from six bank branches in Jakarta to examine the relationship between customer knowledge, customer intimacy, and repurchase intention. The author found that customer intimacy occurs when the company develops a bond and trust in the relationship. Customer knowledge was a critical factor in developing lasting relationships. The author asserted that customers should have strong knowledge of the product or service to remember it. The results of Nora's study showed a positive correlation between trust, religious commitment, customer knowledge, intimacy, relational commitment, and the impact on customer loyalty and repurchase intention. Customers will likely repurchase when trust is created (Nora, 2019).

Sugama and Sukaatmadja (2020) explained that increased customer satisfaction leads to customers recommending services. For example, Oraedu (2020) examined relationship marketing concepts and the effect on customer WOM behaviors. The authors concluded that trust and satisfaction are positive determinants of WOM behavior. However, there should be a greater emphasis on building and maintaining trust to enhance WOM from a relationship quality perspective. Conversely, indifferent customers are less likely to share their experiences, and dissatisfied customers are more likely to share their negative experiences publicly (CITE). Sugama and Sukaatmadja pointed out that customers who may not be satisfied at the beginning of the relationship are likely to share a positive experience if the company handles complaints to their satisfaction. Improving service quality will increase customer satisfaction and company profitability as well as attract new customers (Sugama & Sukaatmadja, 2020). Therefore, understanding how to meet customer needs and increase their satisfaction promotes positive behaviors from customers that improve a company's brand with new prospective customers.

Yeggn and Amoako examined brand equity and loyalty when implementing relationship marketing activities in the telecommunications industry. Yeggn (2021) collected data using a questionnaire from 323 customers of mobile network operators across multiple companies to measure the impact of relationship marketing practices on brand loyalty. The author concluded that the customer became dependent on the brand based on these relational experiences, such as proactive customer outreach, monitoring customer purchase behaviors, rewards programs, and customer cocreation. Likewise,

Amoako (2019) explained that brand equity determines a brand's power in the market, which occurs with the effective implementation of relationship marketing. The author examined how relationship marketing activities can result in brand equity by measuring the variables of (a) trust, (b) empathy, (c) communication, (d) bonding, (e) shared value, and (f) reciprocity and their effect on (g) brand association, (h) brand loyalty, and (i) perceived quality as antecedents to brand equity with the outcomes of customer and company value. Data were collected and measured from 1,000 customers in four telecommunications companies in Ghana. The author indicated that all the relationship marketing variables significantly impacted brand equity, leading to company and customer value. Yeggn and Amoako demonstrated how the telecommunications industry increased brand equity and loyalty when implementing relationship marketing activities. Companies that can retain customers can sustain in these environments (Hadi et al., 2019; Yeggn, 2021).

Relationship marketing is used primarily in the service sector; therefore, there have been many studies conducted on the effectiveness of these concepts with customers in the telecommunications, banking, retail, and insurance industries. Student needs closely resemble service customers' needs. Pardiyono et al. (2022) collected data from 526 students in a higher education university in Indonesia to study marketing principles for attracting and retaining students. The authors indicated that marketing principles to attract students should include the concepts of the 4P model. However, the marketing model to retain students should use the 7P marketing mix model. Pardiyono et al. posited that higher education should satisfy customers' needs like any other business and use

marketing principles to attract and retain students to stay competitive. In addition,

students who have a good experience from acquisition to graduation will refer others to

enroll in the university, so a university having a strategy to attract and retain students is

beneficial (Pardiyono et al., 2022). A student referring another student to the same

institution can be like customers who share a positive WOM; however, students also

share their negative experiences through WOM, which, like any industry, can influence

the purchase intentions of prospective customers.

Understanding the key constructs of the commitment-trust theory and their

business application is essential to effectively implementing relationship marketing

activities using the commitment-trust model. Commitment and trust are the most critical

elements because they suggest to marketers to (a) focus on maintaining the relationship

through collaboration with the customer, (b) choose opportunities to maintain a

relationship if it means sacrificing a short-term win, and (c) avoid actions that

demonstrate opportunistic behavior (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The attributes of the

commitment-trust theory offer specific actions an organization can take to improve

customer outcomes.

Relationship Trust

Trust is the main factor in the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing.

A party establishes trust with another party when there is an assurance that the party is

reliable and acting with integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The authors found that

communications, opportunistic behavior, and shared values are antecedents to trust. How

these concepts are applied may differ depending on the company and type of service. For

example, in online banking services, increasing trust could include accuracy, ease of self-service options, accessible online customer service, and complaint management. In contrast, excellent service could mean service from hotel staff, room cleanliness, and complaint management in the hospitality industry. To develop trust, companies must demonstrate that they are responsive and communicative, putting the customer's best interest ahead of their own, and have a common goal with the customer.

Shared values are an antecedent to both commitment and trust. When two parties share values, they are more likely to be committed to the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A company demonstrates its values consistently through behaviors, actions, and interactions with the customer. Shared values happen when the customer and company have common goals (Amoako, 2019). When two parties share values, it makes it easier to bond, communicate and cooperate, which results in trust and commitment. Working towards a common goal helps foster a committed relationship.

Trust is paramount for relationship marketing to be successful. Trust and commitment are critical to long-lasting relationships (Amoako et al., 2019; Berry et al., 2020; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Setyawan et al., 2019). The methods in which trust is established can depend on the type of company and the services offered; it can also differ between online and offline services. Brown et al. (2019) further examined the commitment-trust theory and confirmed that trust fosters commitment. Brown et al. also found that while there is a positive relationship between trust and commitment, there is also a negative relationship between commitment to trust. Brown et al. posited that when a customer is committed, they grow increasingly vulnerable, making it easier for the firm

to break the trust. Therefore, Brown et al. recommended that it is essential for companies to focus on maintaining trust with the customer with communication, honesty, and transparency and focusing on reducing relationship costs and increasing relationship benefits. Høgevold et al. (2020) examined economic satisfaction and non-economic satisfaction in the context of the commitment-trust theory. They found that the benefits of the conceptual framework are both financial and sociological. As proven in the commitment-trust theory, opportunistic behavior, communications, and shared values foster trust. It is essential to understand these antecedents to apply them in business effectively.

Communication

Communication influences trust when a party perceives that the quality of communication is adequate, including being relevant, timely, and reliable (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Therefore, communication is vital to any relationship; without it, a business will be negatively impacted (Amoako, 2019). There are many methods and channels to communicate with customers to form trust. Thaichon et al. (2019) reviewed over 100 research documents and posit that online firms need to invest in developing interactive and pleasurable experiences for customers to connect with them. According to signaling theory, accurate information regarding product descriptions, website use, and pricing helps to develop trust in an online environment without human interaction. Steinhoff et al. (2019) recommended social media as platforms where customers can engage, provide feedback and act as cocreators, positively affecting retention and engagement. Communication to customers can come in different forms depending on the type of

business and platforms used; however, providing timely, accurate information that is easily accessible is vital to trust.

Another method to apply the communication antecedent to trust is through customer service operations, a common theme found among studies focused on improving relationships and trust with customers in the service industry. Berry et al. (2020) explained that delivering exceptional service will influence a customer's trust in the firm, and poor service can also wear down confidence. The authors posit that a customer perceives a service as a purchase before experiencing it. In this way, the customer purchases based on the company's potential to deliver what is promised (Berry et al., 2020). For example, IBM's high value resulted from outstanding customer service (Nora, 2019). Quality service in the service industry that is continuously improved is critical to customer loyalty and a company's ongoing financial success (Nora, 2019; Putra & Putri, 2019).

Many researchers have studied the positive outcomes of quality service in the business. Putra and Putri (2019) examined the role of perceived service quality and relationship marketing on the part of customer loyalty in the hotel industry. The authors used a quantitative method to analyze responses to a questionnaire from 98 customers who stayed at the Dewarna Hotel more than once. The authors indicate that service quality significantly and positively affected relationship marketing and customer loyalty via relationship marketing. Modern consumers are more inclined to care about the end-to-end service experience than past generations (Putra & Putri, 2019). Likewise, Bardauskaite (2014) found that customers require satisfaction with the holistic service

quality and not just one-off service experiences to achieve loyalty. A customer considers the sum of all experiences, demonstrated consistently and continuously to establish trust and commitment.

For companies whose service operations with customers are primarily online, relationship marketing concepts of developing trust through communication are still relevant. Sleiman et al. (2021) studied how technology plays a role in establishing commitment within relationship marketing in the banking industry. The antecedents measured were trust, security, convenience, and control of customer satisfaction, leading to loyalty. The author hypothesized that one of the strategies to achieve customer satisfaction is to use technology to provide customer self-service options, which improves customer convenience, control, security, and trust in the company. Furthermore, the authors indicated that customer satisfaction achieved through the antecedents positively impacted commitment. Therefore, the authors recommend that leaders in the banking industry improve technological capabilities for customers to enhance their experience, thus enhancing their satisfaction and loyalty to the bank. Do and Vu (2020) described customer satisfaction as a measure of how businesses meet and exceed customer expectations using their products and services. Likewise, Jedin and Balachandran (2021) considered customer satisfaction a vital instrument in the service industry. The authors explained that customers would express their satisfaction or otherwise and compare their experience among services providers and what they expect.

Complaint management systems are another method to strengthen communications and trust with customers. When customers are satisfied with how

complaints are handled, they will trust that future issues will also be resolved amicably,
improving the functional conflict outcome of the commitment-trust theory (Morgan &
Hunt, 1994). Martín et al. (2004) asserted that customers' trust in the company's
intentions and values is the most important to a long-term relationship. Likewise, Isaeva
et al. (2020) posited that trust, mediated by commitment, loyalty, sales effectiveness, and
collaborative, cooperative, and successful exchange relationships, is key to success in the
service sector. Methods can be implemented to improve customer communications,
including quality customer service, complaint management systems, and quality online
services. These methods also demonstrate the company's investment in the customers'
experience and acting in the customer's best interest, which reduces the possibility of a
firm demonstrating opportunistic behaviors.

Opportunistic Behavior

Opportunistic behavior is an antecedent that can negatively impact trust (Morgan
& Hunt, 1994). Trust is established when one party perceives that the other party
consistently acts with integrity, demonstrating expertise, reliability, compassion, honesty,
and fairness (Sheikh et al., 2021). Jia et al. (2021) explained that a company's
opportunistic behavior could offer a short-term benefit; however, it can harm customer
trust, ultimately impacting its financial performance. Therefore, a company's
understanding of limiting opportunistic behaviors in its marketing strategies is essential
to developing healthy and sustainable customer relationships (Jia et al., 2021). Through a
historical review of marketing, Edwards and Baker (2020) explained that when consumer
purchases were low, marketers increased advertising to attract customers. The authors

explained that this behavior is counter-intuitive because when customers recognize that companies are acting in a way that benefits themselves rather than the customer, they are less likely to engage with that business. According to the commitment trust theory, developing trust in a relationship improves functional conflict, the customer's decision-making uncertainty, and their cooperation in the relationship.

Another way a company can demonstrate that they act in the customer's best interest is through conflict resolution methods. An active conflict occurs when a problem is solved harmoniously, reducing resentment, and providing a platform where parties can resolve issues (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Conversely, trust in relationships is harmed when issues arising as part of the normal operating rhythm are challenging to resolve. Setyawan et al. (2019) posited that trust enables a solid relationship where both parties can enhance their collaboration and resolve disputes more efficiently. Complaint management and customer service are key drivers influencing commitment and functional conflict

According to the commitment-trust theory, a negative outcome when trust is not established is the customer's decision-making uncertainty. When trust is lacking, it can be challenging for customers to make decisions throughout the relationship. On the other hand, customers make decisions confidently when they have established trust with the company (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For example, a decision can include purchasing an additional product or continuing the current relationship. Therefore, trust is essential to a company's financial growth and profitability.

A positive outcome of establishing trust is cooperation. Cooperation occurs when commitment and trust exist, and the party is willing to cooperate to maintain the

relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). The customer's mutual investment in the relationship is key to success and productivity. A customer's willingness to participate, co-create, and partner with the service provider exemplifies cooperation. Companies that use methods relevant to their business to establish trust will consequently increase a customer's commitment to the relationship.

Relationship Commitment

One party is more willing to commit to a relationship with another party where trust is established. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explained that relationship commitment occurs when one party believes that continuing a relationship with the other party is significant enough that it is worth putting in the effort to maintain it. The authors prove that commitment outcomes increase acquiescence, reduce customers' propensity to leave, and increase the desire to cooperate. When commitment is established, acquiescence is demonstrated in the party's likeliness to adhere to requests and policies driven by the other party (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). For example, a customer may be more likely to follow required and recommended actions by the company, including following policies, completing tasks, and meeting deadlines. Also, the customer is less likely to leave when trust and commitment are established. As explained earlier, cooperation occurs when loyalty and trust exist, and the party is willing to cooperate to maintain the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). These outcomes result from the customer's cost-benefit analysis of the relationship.

A customer evaluates their decision to commit based on the value of the relationship determined through the relationship costs and benefits. Relationship costs

and benefits can be both monetary and non-monetary. For example, the service price is a tangible monetary cost, whereas a customer who feels an emotional connection may experience a high intangible cost of leaving the relationship. When customers trust a relationship, they are more likely to stay in it (Setyawan et al., 2019). Researchers see commitment as the feelings and desire to maintain a relationship with a brand rather than ensure repeat purchases (Amoako et al., 2019). Commitment indicates that a party plans to continue a relationship and takes the relationship seriously (Ahmmed et al., 2019). Following the social exchange theory and Gronroos's (1997) relationship marketing theory, a customer also determines their commitment to the other party by weighing the costs and benefits of the relationship. A customer committed to the relationship with the service provider is likelier to demonstrate loyalty and retain. Therefore, customers evaluate the relationship's cost and benefits to determine their commitment level.

Relationship Termination Cost

Relationship termination costs are what the customer expects to lose if they end the relationship. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explained that relationship termination costs are the totality of what the party expects to lose from ending the relationship and switching to an alternative. When deciding to switch, the customer considers monetary, non-monetary, and psychological factors (Sheikh et al., 2021). Affective commitment occurs when a customer has a strong sense of belonging and emotional connection to the company and decides to stay despite higher monetary costs than the alternative. Amoako et al. (2019) examined affective and continuance commitment and the effects on trust, commitment, and repurchase intention by analyzing data collected from 167 customers at

a top hotel in Ghana. The authors found that achieving a solid bond to the brand aligned with affective commitment is more valuable than reducing termination costs. Rather (2019) explained affective commitment occurs when a customer desires to remain in the relationship because they feel a sense of belonging and a pleasurable experience.

Conversely, a customer may decide to stay because of the financial cost of leaving, despite not having an emotional connection to the brand. Continuous commitment occurs when the party perceives a financial and non-financial cost and does not foresee an alternative to leaving the relationship (Setyawan et al., 2019). Amoako et al. (2019) described continuance commitment as a customer not having a strong feeling towards a brand. If they perceive a high switching cost and fewer options as reasonable as the one, they are less likely to terminate the relationship. A customer will weigh the financial and nonfinancial costs of the relationship with the benefits of staying in the relationship. It is possible that even if the cost is high if the customer has a strong emotional bond to the relationship, they are likely to stay; therefore, companies need to understand how to increase both tangible and intangible relationship benefits.

Relationship Benefits

Relationship benefits are the cumulative positive reasons a customer evaluates to stay in a relationship. Relationship benefits are perceived when the party gains benefits such as pricing, customer service, and product excellence above and beyond their competitors, enhancing their commitment to the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Like relationship termination costs, a relationship benefit can be monetary or nonmonetary. Affective commitment occurs when relationship benefits increase

commitment, such as the party establishing a sense of belonging and connection to the organization (Setyawan et al., 2019). Bardauskaite (2014) defined customer value as occurring when the benefit of the relationship outweighs the cost. For example, Al-Hawari (2022) found that increasing loyalty and trust with online banking customers involves developing an experience that meets customer expectations. Therefore, their positive online experience benefits staying in the relationship.

Companies can better influence customer behaviors when they understand the actions that influence these outcomes. The commitment-trust theory concepts can help companies in the service sector build and maintain long-lasting relationships with customers to improve financial stability and increase growth and competitive advantage. For-profit, higher education as part of the service industry can potentially benefit from applying these concepts with students as customers in the relationship between the institution and the student.

Online For-Profit Higher Education

Online, for-profit, higher education institutions have the potential to benefit from relationship marketing strategies given the nature of the service, financial dependency on student retention, and relationship with the student. Online, for-profit, higher education institutions have experienced extraordinary growth over the last few decades (Fountain, 2019; Gay & Betts, 2020; Hodgman, 2018; Santos, 2020). Santos (2020) defined for-profit institutions as profit-making schools that provide certificates, associate degrees, bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees in different concentrations. The author explained that post secondary institutions experienced rapid growth through this

profit-making and provided new opportunities for students to experience vocational and post-secondary education. The author also explained that for-profit institutions have a higher enrollment volume due to less restrictive admissions requirements. The author argues that attracting and enrolling prospective students is like traditional business marketing practices, evident by the monetary investment made in marketing at for-profit, higher education institutions. For-profit, online higher education institutions' rapid growth has also increased challenges to sustain in the market, which requires institutions to consider ways to stay competitive.

For-profit, online higher education institutions have the highest student enrollment rates than nonprofit, public, and campus-based ones. While overall enrollments have declined since 2012, distance enrollments continue to grow (Seaman et al., 2018). Total distance enrollments comprise 14.9% of students (3,003,080) taking distance courses (Seaman et al., 2018). Enrollment in exclusively online institutions is concentrated in approximately 5% of all distance learning intuitions, while it is less concentrated in private, nonprofit institutions (Seaman et al., 2018). Education that uses online channels for faculty to interact with students at a distance facilitated synchronously or asynchronously is considered distance education (Seaman et al., 2018). Half of the for-profit online private institutions account for over 50% of all enrollments among the top 50 institutions (Seaman et al., 2018). Total distance enrollments comprise 14.9% of students (3,003,080) taking distance courses exclusively and 16.7% (3,356,041) taking distance and non-distance courses. In 2016 the percentage of students taking exclusively online courses was higher in private for-profit, with 84.9%, compared to

65.4% in private nonprofit and public 35.3% (Seaman et al., 2018). With a high

concentration of students in a few for-profit private online institutions, the decisions of a

few academic leaders can impact a large percentage of enrolled students (Seaman et al.,

2018). Subsequently, external stakeholders have increased attention and scrutiny on

operations, performance, and student outcomes due to the rapid growth and significant

market share held by for-profit, online higher education institutions.

Stakeholders monitoring for-profit, higher education practices include

government and federal agencies. Guzman et al. (2021) examined federal funding and

higher education institutions. The author stated that in 1992 restrictions were placed

where the federal government changed the requirements for a higher education institution

to participate in Title IV financial aid programs, mainly impacting for-profit, online

institutions. The government lifted those restrictions in 2005. In 2005 the Higher

Education Act was in place, and those universities offering online instruction could fully

participate in Title IV funding (Guzman et al., 2021). Once for-profit, higher education

institutions became eligible for Title IV funding, there was an enormous increase in

student enrollment (Hodgman, 2018). Guzman et al. examined tuition and fees paid by

students who attend exclusively online for-profit schools. The authors shared that online

and exclusively online education enrollment continues to increase, citing that exclusively

online post secondary education is growing primarily by online for-profit institutions.

The analysis found that tuition at for-profit online institutions is higher than at traditional

institutions (Fountain, 2019; Guzman et al., 2021). Hodgman (2018) described for-profit

institutions as a growing market and desirable because of the curriculum, flexibility, and

diverse degree options for nontraditional students. However, for-profit, higher education institutions experience higher loan default rates, lower graduation rates, and job placement than students in other education sectors (Fountain, 2019; Hodgman, 2018). While there are many benefits to offering accessible education to populations that may not have had the opportunity to attend traditional education settings, for-profit, higher education institutions have challenges to overcome.

Government regulations have been mandated that impact for-profit, higher education institutions monitor institutional practices. The rapid growth of for-profit, higher education increased scrutiny on institutional performance (Fountain, 2019). In 2010 the Obama administration introduced Gainful Employment (GE) regulations to hold for-profit higher education institutions accountable for student outcomes (Fountain, 2019). The GE regulation states that all for-profit institutions and nondegree and certificate programs at public and nonprofit institutions must publicly disclose information about program graduates and adhere to the debt-to-earnings ratio of graduates set by the regulations (Fountain, 2019). Programs that fail to meet the requirements of GE would risk losing access to federal financial aid. The primary source of revenue for for-profit institutions is federal aid (Fountain, 2019; Guzman et al., 2021). For-profit institutions may shut down if they lose access to federal assistance, which is a significant portion of their revenue (Fountain, 2019). These external threats are why for-profit, online higher education institutions must focus on improving student outcomes.

Despite scrutiny from some external stakeholders, for-profit, online higher education institutions' flexibility and ease of admissions offer a greater opportunity for

individuals to pursue their education. For-profit higher education institutions have transformed the education sector by providing access to a new nontraditional student base with different needs than traditional students who attend nonprofit institutions and using technology innovations (Hodgman, 2018). The demographics of students who enroll in online and for-profit institutions are different compared to traditional on-campus or not-for-profit institutions (Guzman et al., 2021; Hodgman, 2018; Santos, 2020). Students who enroll in online programs are typically older, are married, have children, and consist of more minority and female students with a lower income than campus or nonprofit institutions Guzman et al. Adults who did not have the opportunity to access education after high school have the obligation of family and jobs have a greater opportunity to earn a degree.

Online education, also referred to as distance learning, offers several advantages to adult learners. Online education allows flexible asynchronous learning from any location (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Muljana and Luo (2019) explained that students could manage their academic studies at their own pace by using technology. The authors explained that flexibility allows students to work while enrolled in school. For-profit higher education institutions offer courses, vocational programs, and all degree programs that are more accessible to students unable to enroll in a traditional university setting (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Radovan (2019) posited that distance education occurs when students and instructors are separated by space. Further, distance learning has benefits of flexibility that traditional learning environments do not offer. The distance learning format also requires the institution to focus on different channels and

modes of delivering instruction and support services (Radovan, 2019). Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) explained that distance education offers flexibility, autonomy a heavy reliance on digital platforms to enhance student performance. In addition, using technology brings the teacher and student closer together and improves communication and collaboration (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). In improving student experience and outcomes, online institutions must consider service experience regarding the student's interaction with the staff and the technology.

For-profit, online higher education has a duality in its profile as a business and an academic institution. Latif et al. (2019) argued that the education sector is considered part of the service industry. The authors posited that higher education institutions must explore how to improve customer perceived service quality due to increased demand in the market. Latif et al.'s goal were to develop a model for higher education leaders to measure service quality and prioritize strategies to stay competitive in the higher education market. Through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis that involved teachers, students, and administrative staff, the results indicated the following six primary factors that affect service quality, (a) teacher quality, (b) administrative services, (c) knowledge services, (d) activities (e) continuous improvement, and (f) leadership quality. The authors emphasized the importance of continuous measures to evaluate service quality, recommending dedicated resources to support the effort. Universities need to take a customer-oriented approach to offer high service quality and brand themselves uniquely attractive to prospective students who decide where they want to enroll (Latif et al., 2019). Likewise, Syapsan (2019) explained that service quality is inclusive of consists

of skills from employees (technical quality), how the company coordinates and integrates (integrative quality), how the services are delivered to the customer (functional quality), and finally, if the services meet customer expectations (quality of results). Since customer satisfaction is a measure of meeting customer expectations, service quality is focused on the customer (Syapsan, 2019). With increased competition in the higher education industry, unique needs of students in online programs, and low retention rates in for-profit higher education institutions, it's important to understand student needs and behaviors and consider methods used in traditional business models to improve customer outcomes in higher education institutions.

Student Retention

Student retention is an area of focus for for-profit, online higher education institutions. While online education is growing in popularity, institutional leaders face challenges retaining students (Guilbault, 2018; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Radovan, 2019). The expansion and growth in the education sector have created increased competition for private higher education institutions to strengthen marketing and focus on student retention as the main factor to ongoing success (Amin, 2021; Carvalho & Mota, 2010; Radovan, 2019). Tight (2020) explained that students who do not retain are also known as student withdrawal, attrition, and dropout. The number of students who withdraw from online institutions is higher than in traditional institutions (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Radovan, 2019; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Nieuwoudt and Pedler (2021) suggested that increasing retention and thus graduation positively affect the institution's financial stability and reputation. Improving retention and graduation also impacts the student

because studies indicate that individuals with a bachelor's degree have a higher income than those without (Nieuwoudt & Pedler, 2021). With increased competition to retain students in the higher education industry, Guilbault (2018) explained that universities are investing more in marketing concepts typically used in traditional business to attract and retain students. Since marketing models show that it is less expensive to retain a customer than attract a new one, higher education institutions are encouraged to use marketing practices to achieve success (Guilbault, 2018). Increasing student retention has several benefits for the financial stability of the institution.

Improving student retention includes improving service quality, student experience, satisfaction, and engagement. Gay and Betts (2020) explained that as higher education enrollments continue to grow, academic quality and the student experience must be fundamental to learning instruction. Guilbault (2018) explained that student success and thus the institution's success is measured according to the student persisting from the first year to the second year and program. Further, Tight (2020) explained that student engagement occurs when a student is deeply embedded into the institution and considered one of the ways to improve retention. Pardiyono et al. (2022) argued that higher education institutions should satisfy their customers to survive in the market. Santos (2020) recommended customer service as an essential driver of student retention. As a service business, higher education institutions should follow marketing principles to attract potential students (Santos, 2020). While student retention is defined and recognized as a growing concern, it remains an issue in for-profit, online higher education.

Identifying student retention as an issue and why students are motivated to stay enrolled or withdraw is essential to developing strategies to increase retention. Tight (2020) claimed that higher education institution leaders and researchers have long focused on how to retain students. Student retention studies began in the 1960s, pioneered with the theory of student departure by Vincent Tinto (1987), and have increased over the years. The author argued that there are more studies on why students withdraw or drop out but less on how the institutions can mitigate the issue (Tight, 2020). Coelho Nunes et al. (2021) explained that competition in higher education, primarily due to the emergence of for-profit institutions and online learning, has added pressure to attract and retain students. The competition has resulted in higher education institutions using defensive marketing tactics to attract students. However, as Edwards and Baker (2020) explained, powerful marketing tactics can also pose a risk to the relationship with the customer if the customer identifies opportunistic behaviors. In addition, marketing tactics to increase student enrollments to improve financial outcomes can be costly and continue to attract scrutiny from external stakeholders. Therefore, increasing student retention to improve financial stability and growth benefits institutions.

Understanding student motivations, expectations, and needs helps to develop an appropriate plan to increase student retention. Tinto (1987) developed one of the earliest student retention theories explaining that students must integrate academically and socially into the institution to progress successfully. Many studies have since examined student retention using Tinto's theory as the framework. For example, Romito et al. (2020) examined why students withdraw and found that one of the main factors was their

perception of the quality of experience. The authors discovered that lack of instructor guidance and peer connection were among the factors that affected student commitment. Likewise, Cruz (2021) found that negative student experiences included poor faculty instruction, preparedness, expensive tuition, acquiring large debts, and unmarketable degrees. The recommendation from the author was to provide students with better guidance to make informed decisions about their post secondary education, which includes understanding the cost and benefits of enrolling in the program.

Additionally, Muljana and Luo (2019) found that retention can be improved through risk mitigation, communication strategies, instructor engagement, and ongoing coaching and tools for faculty to support students. The authors posit that student retention is a collective effort from all levels of academic staff and the student. Effective student services, new student orientation, effective use of technology, and student outreach programs are strategies to influence retention. Other techniques include effective student engagement, increasing students' sense of belonging, instructor teaching methods, and course design (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Radovan (2019) recommended that higher education leaders focus on motivating students, delivering engaging content, and improving social interaction between students and teachers to drive retention. The author also recommended timely quality service throughout the program. Russell and Jarvis (2019) found that many students cited a lack of support from the institution as a leading factor for withdrawing. The authors indicated that a student's sense of belonging is critical to success. Therefore, developing extra support and activities to engage a student will aid in improving a student's sense of belonging (Russell & Jarvis, 2019). Many

programs and tactics have been examined and implemented to promote academic and social integration. Still, few have examined implementing relationship marketing concepts commonly used in the relationship between service companies and customers.

Students as a Customer

Applying customer-centric strategies is not widely accepted among university staff and leaders in the higher education industry. There is still debate on the role of the student and staff in higher education institutions (Gillespie & Finney, 2009; Guilbault, 2018; Mark, 2013; Ogunmokun et al., 2021). Higher education institutions should define the student-customer role (Guilbault, 2018). Using marketing and other business strategies necessitates adopting a customer-centric approach to student engagement strategies. Gravett et al. (2019) and Gillespie and Finney (2009) explored the role of the student in higher education. Gillespie and Finney assessed the concept of the student as a customer, and Gravett et al. examined the role of the student as a partner. Gillespie and Finney referenced the model in higher education considered a business approach to student management, referring to students-as-customers, The authors posit that the model focuses on providing students with good customer service, such as the university staff being accessible and adhering to service level agreements when responding to students. The authors claimed that some educators still do not accept the students-as-customers model because it suggests that, like a business customer, a student would become entitled. This entitlement could negatively impact student outcomes if the expectation is that students can expect specific grades as a customer (Gillespie & Finney, 2009). Gravett et al. discovered that university leaders view students in a role that expands

beyond customers through a concept mapping method. The authors illustrated that

ongoing dialogue between the staff and students more closely resembles a partnership.

The values reflected in these interactions should be evident in the documented university

strategies (Gravett et al., 2019). However, higher education institution leaders have not

established a balance between a customer-centric approach and the potential threat to

academic integrity if students are viewed as customers.

Students understand they have a responsibility in the relationship with the

institution. Education leaders oppose viewing students as customers because they believe

that the customer is always right will adversely affect the education process (Calma &

Dickson-Deane, 2020; Guilbault, 2018; Mark, 2013). However, Guilbault (2018)

explained that the idea that the 'customer is always right is an outdated idea coined in the

early 1900's no longer globally recognized. Customer theories have since evolved, where

higher education institutions can consider a customer-centric approach without

compromising the learning process. Henry (2020) explained that online students

recognize their role in their online learning experience and are mindful of their

motivation, ability, and circumstances as they embark on their first year of study.

Students expect to take responsibility for managing their learning and appreciate the need

to be proactive. Students expect their university to offer meaningful interaction, a

relevant, flexible, challenging curriculum, and a reliable learning environment. Henry

recommended that institutions set expectations through communications and programs to

meet student needs and help them effectively prepare and make informed decisions.

Similarly, Mark (2013) explained that, as in other services, students' role as a customer

and cocreator should not come with the assumption that they would not be accountable for their outcomes. The student is responsible for understanding the program requirements, having the time and resources, and meeting those requirements. The author explained that more universities are allowing students to contribute to the development of the teaching and learning process, increasing their commitment to the process. Understanding the customer's needs and accepting their input in some aspects of the service will help the service provider. In education, students look to the expertise of their faculty to guide the learning process, but they also are co-creators of the process based on what they need and the outcomes they desire. The author recommended developing quality learning experiences and focusing on the student's needs in a way that would not threaten the quality of learning. Mark explained that the greatest threat to the evolution of the teacher-student relationship is the reluctance to accept the evolving role of the student.

Defining a role for the student that meets the needs of the business, institution, and student is key to the organization's ability to develop strategies to increase student retention. Guilbault (2018) explained that understanding the role of the student as a customer is essential to stay competitive in the higher education sector, and the idea that the student is not a customer should no longer exist. Likewise, Ogunmokun et al. (2021) explained that with competition increasing in higher education institutions and the increased cost of education, students have more expectations and control over the buyer-seller relationship. Higher education institutions need to improve service quality to stay competitive. For example, students want to feel good about their relationships with

faculty and peers. The authors recommended that higher education institutions use a

customer-oriented approach to stay competitive in the education industry. The authors

indicate that each student has unique needs, and the ability to customize and personalize

the experience will aid in increased customer well-being.

Further, it is important to understand students perceived value in service quality to

meet their needs and involve them in developing quality, innovative services. Matus et al.

(2021) agreed that since students use products and services and engage with university

technology, students can become synonymous with customers. The authors explained that

customer satisfaction is essential to a company's brand in the market. Guilbault (2018)

further explained that the reluctance to view the student as a customer is driven mainly by

faculty. The author suggested that the reluctance from faculty may be because quality

customer service appears as a threat to academic integrity. Guilbault stated that students

are customers because their measure of success is to persist and complete their

educational goals. The author explained that higher education marketing is standard in

the United States. Marketing requires understanding the customer; Therefore, defining

the student as a customer is critical because a customer influences many practices.

Guilbault argued that when students are not treated as customers by their higher

education institutions, they are not receiving customer service. Finally, the author

explained that if customer orientation is related to customer satisfaction, increased

customer orientation will lead to increased retention and graduation, a goal in the higher

education industry. Since faculty plays a vital role in student satisfaction, and if not ready

to take a customer-centric approach to students, this could be an issue that needs

attention. Guilbault suggested that shifting the faculty approach towards a more customer-centric approach requires cultural changes, training, coaching, and changes to processes and procedures. A personalized customer-oriented approach to improving the student experience will have positive outcomes.

While there are opposing views to recognizing the student as a customer, the benefits outweigh the costs, and relationship marketing could be the most appropriate method to increase student retention. Calma and Dickson-Deane's (2020) literature review analysis on the topic of students as customers discussed the contrasting views on the topic. The idea against students as a customer included the notion that the "customer is always right" idea would change the role of the instructor. Further, the authors shared that the benefits of an education permeate throughout the student's personal and professional life long after their educational experience; therefore, institutions should not measure quality like a customer. Another argument against treating customers as students is that university practices emphasize marketing the brand, selling features and benefits, and concentrating on enrollment growth and revenue, threatening the teaching and learning process. Upon conclusion of the literature review, Calma and Dickson-Deane recommended that higher education leaders who do choose to treat the student as a customer should embark on relationship marketing strategies. Conversely, institutions that do not choose to treat students as customers should consider long-term quality initiatives such as building long-lasting relationships through alumni, employer, and life-long learning relationships (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). While the concept of students as customers is still controversial, most authors agree that students should at

least be considered cocreators, and institutions should take a customer-centric approach to building and to maintain student relationships.

Student Retention and Relationship Marketing Concepts

Concepts from the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing have increased student trust, commitment, satisfaction, and loyalty. For example, Terzic and Ascic (2018) collected data from 519 public and private higher education institutions to examine student satisfaction with communication and the contribution to overall satisfaction. The authors indicated that communication with the staff significantly impacted students' overall satisfaction. Likewise, Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) explored the multidimensional aspect of online learning and highlighted how to improve communication and interaction in online learning environments in higher education. Online learning provides flexible learning at a distance, so it is even more important to use effective communication to avoid pitfalls such as a student feeling lonely. The authors explained that because the purpose of communicating is different for everyone, effective communication requires two-way interaction where both parties listen to and respond to one another. Vlachopoulos and Makri recommended that instructors offer effective communication by providing sincere feedback, summarizing a student's response, and responding more than once a week. The authors found that peer interaction is another important aspect of online communication. The author recommends facilitating online exchange using social media networking sites in threaded discussions or group interactions within assignments.

Like companies in other service sectors, service quality is a factor in increasing student satisfaction. For example, Ismanova (2019) posited that loyal students are essential to the survival of higher education institutions. The author indicated that improving service quality will increase student loyalty and retention. Furthermore, when students perceive that they are receiving quality services, it increases their commitment, significantly impacting loyalty. Snijders et al. (2020) explained that when students demonstrate loyalty, they will participate in positive behaviors such as staying enrolled, recommending the school to other students, or being more engaged with the university, enhancing the university outcomes. Therefore, improving service quality is essential in increasing student commitment and loyalty.

Like customers, students examine the institution's behaviors that foster trust and commitment and evaluate the cost and benefit of staying in the relationship. Carvalho and Mota (2010) explained that the institution gains trust when the staff demonstrates competency and expertise in conflict resolution, values the students, treats them with respect, and puts their interests ahead of the institution. The authors recommend that higher education leaders manage the student relationship like other service industries like retail and airline. The authors posit that students who trust an institution are more likely to recommend it. Therefore, an educational institution can exhibit behaviors that foster a student's trust, resulting in positive outcomes for the institution and student.

An institution's ability to handle student complaints effectively establishes trust. Msosa (2021) suggested that institutions measure their conflict handling processes to improve the student experience. They explained that conflict handling is integral to

addressing issues in the service process. Further, customer complaints can come from a problem with the product or service when the university does not meet the customer's expectations or when the product or service is not delivered as promised. The author suggested that customer complaints can be an opportunity to improve customer satisfaction and the relationship. An effective complaints management system can also provide key metrics to the staff to enhance the customer experience (Msosa, 2021).

An educational institution's ability to demonstrate credibility, reliability, and benevolence is key to establishing trust and commitment with the student. Amin (2021) examined how trust is developed based on the student's perceived value in developing student loyalty in higher education. The author explained that an institution demonstrates benevolence when a student believes that the institution is acting in a way that benefits the student and not the institution. Also, explaining reliability is achieved when the institution solves problems amicably. The author concluded that students are customers just as any other service. By developing trust with the students, students will recommend the institution to other prospective students and will likely return to the institution for future degrees (Amin, 2021). Likewise, Yousaf et al.'s (2018) found that reliability is important to student loyalty, which can be gained through a university demonstrating expertise and effective conflict handling. Integrity also has a high impact on loyalty which can be acquired through demonstrated ethical behavior by the institution. Finally, credibility is established when an institution demonstrates genuine and honest behaviors (Yousaf et al., 2018). Therefore, it is vital to understand the behaviors that can strengthen a student's perception of the institution and compromise it so institutional leaders can

make systematic changes to develop relationships with students, improve student outcomes, and improve its growth and performance.

Conclusion

Marketers determine the appropriate marketing models to apply that are the most effective in planning and decision-making to meet their audience's needs. While traditional marketing models focus on attracting new customers, relationship marketing models are used in the service industry to increase customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention. Services are different from products because they are considered intangible consumer purchases. Therefore, consumers purchase with the expectation of an experience before having the experience, so companies seek to align the quality of the experience with the customer's expectation. In addition, with increased competition in the global market, customers of service providers have more options and continuously analyze the cost and benefit of staying with one provider or switching to another. Therefore, marketing leaders of service companies seek strategies to increase customer satisfaction and retain current customers. Retaining customers is a financial benefit to service companies. First, it costs less to retain a customer than to recruit a new customer. Also, satisfied customers share their experiences with prospective customers through positive WOM. Further, satisfied customers are more likely to demonstrate loyalty and continue to purchase from the same service provider. Therefore, researchers and marketing leaders of service companies examine methods to increase customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

Characteristics of companies and customers in the service sector such as banking, hospitality, telecommunications, insurance, and retail are like for-profit, higher education institutions and students enrolled in degree programs. For-profit, higher education leaders seek to stay competitive in a growing and globalized market by increasing financial profitability. One of the ways leaders of for-profit, higher education seek to increase financial growth and stability is through student retention. For-profit higher education institutions could benefit from understanding how to increase student retention using relationship marketing strategies.

Transition

Section 1 included contextual elements of the study, including the problem's background and the problem and purpose statement. I also provided an overview of the population and sampling method, nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study. Next, I provided a review of the professional and academic literature. Finally, I reviewed concepts related to the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, participant criteria and eligibility, research method and design, population and sampling method, and ethical considerations. I will also review the data collection instruments and techniques and how data are organized and analyzed. Finally, I will review the reliability and validity methods for the data collected in this study. In Section 3, I will provide the study results to present the findings, the application to professional

practice, and implications for social change. I will offer managerial implications and

recommendations for actions and research recommendations. Finally, I will reflect on the

study and outcomes and provide a conclusion.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes a restatement of the purpose statement as well as an explanation of the role of the researcher, participant criteria and eligibility, research method and design, population and sampling method, and ethical considerations. I also review the data collection instrument and techniques as well as how data are organized and analyzed. Finally, at the end of Section 2, I discuss the reliability and validity of the data collected in this study.

Purpose Statement

In this qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study, I explored the marketing strategies some for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders in the United States use to increase student retention. The specific population for this study was marketing leaders at for-profit, online, higher education institutions who had successfully implemented marketing strategies to increase student retention.

Role of the Researcher

I chose a qualitative, exploratory, multiple-case study research design for this study. I was the primary data collection and analysis instrument in this study as the researcher. Each decision the researchers makes concerning the study's design affects the quality of the research and adherence to ethics (Saunders et al., 2015). As the primary researcher, I was responsible for identifying the research topic, recruiting participants, identifying data collection methods, analyzing data, and producing results and conclusions based on the findings. In addition, I conducted member checking to promote validity in the results. When member checking, researchers review and refine data

collection, clarify results, and check the accuracy of the understanding of the interviews by providing the participants an opportunity to review the final transcripts (Karagiozis, 2018).

The only relationship I had with the topic of this study was that I was once an employee of a for-profit, online, higher education institution. My primary roles in this capacity were professional business roles focused on customer experience and financial growth. Researchers should strongly understand their personal bias that may affect the study's outcomes (Karagiozis, 2018). I collected data thoroughly and objectively to avoid bias and requested that the participants review the final transcripts, so I would not selectively choose responses. Saunders et al. (2015) suggested that collecting data with the utmost accuracy helps maintain objectivity. In a qualitative study, conducting multiple case studies is one way to ensure reliability. As Heale and Twycross (2015) suggested, the consistency of the results of each case studied is how reliability is measured.

The researcher has an ethical responsibility to uphold the standards of conduct of the participants and anyone affected by this study (Saunders et al., 2015). As the researcher, I maintained the standards of conduct directed by *The Belmont Report,* which are respect for persons (i.e., autonomy and protection), beneficence (i.e., treated ethically, causing no harm), and justice (i.e., fairness in distribution/what is deserved; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). *The Belmont Report* provides the ethical context for researching with people (Redman & Caplan, 2021). One way I adhered to the ethical principles outlined in

The Belmont Report's was to ensure the confidentiality of research participants. In addition, I provided a consent form before participation, unbiased selection of participants, and conducted interviews and correspondence with participants respectfully and professionally. A qualitative researcher should be self-aware, understand ethical considerations, establish trust with participants, and respect participants as individuals with unique perspectives (Karagiozis, 2018).

An interview is a discussion between more than one person that has direction and is intentional (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). I explored marketing managers' strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online, higher education institutions through asking participants open-ended questions in semistructured interviews. Open-ended questions are used in a semistructured interview, which also includes asking additional, probing questions based on the participants' responses (Dikko, 2016). In addition, I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to establish rapport with participants, manage time effectively, and maintain consistency in the interviews. An interview protocol is a set of rules and guidelines for conducting interviews (Dikko, 2016). I followed the interview protocol with each participant to enhance the reliability of the study results.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to identify and invite marketing leaders who had successfully implemented marketing strategies to increase student retention at for-profit, online, higher education institutions in the United States. Participants were recruited through use of a participant invitation. The interviewees met the following eligibility requirements: (a) experience in for-profit, online higher education; (b) being at the

marketing manager level or above in their organization; and (c) experience implementing

strategies to increase student retention at a for-profit online, higher education institution.

Participants were chosen for the final study if they demonstrated sufficient knowledge of

strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online higher education. Ghaljaie et

al. (2017) explained that qualitative research collects rich data on the event versus

surface-level information; therefore, it is essential to be intentional about the participants

selected for data collection. First, I identified research participants on LinkedIn's

professional networking social media platform. I created a LinkedIn profile indicating

that I am doctoral student seeking participants for a research study. The profile contained

a brief overview of the study. Next, I conducted a Google search to find the names of

online, for-profit, higher education institutions in the United States. I searched for those

institutions by name on LinkedIn, identified employees associated with those institutions

with a marketing-related title, and sent the participant invitation.

Saunders et al. (2015) explained that researchers used internet-mediated access to

participants remotely through digital devices, such as email or the web. I used the

LinkedIn messaging platform and email to build rapport with the participants who

responded to the invitation, offering an overview of the study and research questions, and

answering questions about privacy and confidentially to establish comfort with the

participant. I established a comfortable meeting time for the participant to conduct the

interview and requested the email address where I could send the online meeting

invitation to the participant. The participants were informed that I would conduct the

interview using an online meeting platform and the interview would be recorded. Jenner

and Myers (2019) explained that remote interviewing could make participants feel secure

with the private information they share if set in a private location. Using my student

email address, I sent the meeting invites to the participant's email address for the

expected time to log into the live meeting platform to conduct the interview. I established

a working relationship with the participants by following the interview protocol (see

Appendix A) guidelines to offer participants a pleasant, professional, safe, and consistent

experience.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Researchers use qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to conduct research

studies (Taguchi, 2018). I used a qualitative approach to address this study's research

question. Researchers use the qualitative method to gather information in the context of

the natural setting to analyze and interpret the phenomenon in terms of the meaning

people bring to them (Cypress, 2018). Qualitative researchers seek to understand what

underlies the phenomenon (Cypress, 2018). I selected the qualitative method to explore

marketing strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online institutions.

In contrast, quantitative researchers measure the relationship between variables

using data and analytics (Saunders et al., 2015). In a quantitative study, a larger sample

size is used to determine an effect that occurred instead of a chance occurrence, whereas

a qualitative study uses a smaller sample to understand the topic (Farrugia, 2019). I did

not use the quantitative method. The quantitative method measures the numerical

difference in the data based on a standard (Yin, 2018). Mixed methods are when the

researcher uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches in the study (Saunders et al., 2015). The mixed-method approach can provide a researcher with a diverse perspective (Saunders et al., 2015). I did not use the mixed-method approach because the quantitative method was not necessary to address the research question of this study.

I chose an exploratory approach because exploratory case studies are helpful when trying to understand the reasons behind what is happening and why (see Saunders et al., 2015). Recommended practices for conducting exploratory research include literature reviews and interviews with subject matter experts (Saunders et al., 2015). I conducted semistructured interviews in the current study. Saunders et al. (2015) explained that semistructured interviews ask open-ended questions and probe participants throughout to understand participants' reasons and attitudes about a phenomenon. In addition to the semistructured interviews, I collected data through reviewing publicly available information, including social media posts and the institutions' websites.

Research Design

I employed a qualitative, exploratory, multiple case study design to explore the strategies used by marketing leaders in online, for-profit higher education to increase student retention. According to Yin (2018), one of the ways researchers use a case study is to gain practical views of managers' operations in an organization. Therefore, the case study approach helped me understand the current marketing practices of marketing leaders in for-profit, online, higher education institutions. Ethnography is a research design like a case study in that the data collection can include multiple sources (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). However, in the ethnographic approach, information is

gathered from large populations from a cultural perspective (Cypress, 2018). I did not

conduct an ethnography because I was not seeking to study a culture. The narrative

research design is used to gather information from the subjects sharing their story related

to the topic of study (Cypress, 2018). Tomaszewski et al. (2020) explained that a

narrative study is different than a case study or ethnography because it focuses on the

participant's story. I did not employ a narrative design because I sought to understand

strategies and not stories related to the study. A narrative study was also inappropriate for

the current study because it can be conducted with only one person or several who share a

similar experience. In contrast, I sought common themes about a current case and not

individual accounts of past events. Phenomenologists seek to conduct their study through

the individual's lived experience (Saunders et al., 2015). I did not use the

phenomenological design because the study was focused on business strategies, not lived

experiences, to explore a concept or idea. In the phenomenological design, the researcher

analyzes the meaning of an event based on the individuals who experienced it

(Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Instead, I used the case study design that is focused on

boundaries over a period of time (see Cypress, 2018). Researchers use case studies to

illuminate the research topic by examining relevant data (Motulsky, 2021). Motulsky

(2021) explained that the case study approach helps gain a broad understanding of the

topic with detailed descriptions.

I chose the multiple case study approach for this study because it helps gain richer

data than a single source (see Yin, 2018). I interviewed participants from multiple

institutions to compare their marketing strategies and identify commonalities among them

to increase student retention. Farrugia (2019) explained that examining a case provides deep and rich data to explore. Furthermore, the author asserted that using multiple cases would strengthen the credibility of the study results. Saunders et al. (2015) explained that the researcher could identify harmonious information between the cases by examining multiple cases.

To achieve data saturation, I recruited participants for interviews until I no longer discovered new themes emerging from the data analysis process. Farrugia (2019) explained that if the research and continued examination of the data offers no new themes, concepts, or ideas, the interview process for further data collection can end. I thoroughly analyzed the data to identify common themes, concepts, and ideas by examining the recordings and documented transcripts as well as carrying out the NVivo coding process. I also identified new themes, concepts, or ideas by triangulating the interview data with data from publicly available documents, including social media posts and the institutions' websites. Data from all sources that are relevant to the study should also be taken into consideration (Alam, 2020). I repeated the process of sampling and analyzing data until there were no new emerging themes, concepts, or ideas relevant to the study.

Population and Sampling

I used purposeful and snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants who confidently provide the most fruitful responses to the research question (Farrugia, 2019). Once the participant provided their written consent, I used snowball sampling to ask the consenting

participants if they wanted to refer additional members who would meet the eligibility

criteria and would be interested in participating. Ghaljaie et al. (2017) described snowball

sampling as a method used when it is challenging to gain access to participants because

of specific attributes. In snowball sampling, the participants refer individuals within their

network to participate in the study (Ghaljaie et al., 2017). Snowball sampling was

valuable in my research study because this method aided in widening the search for more

participants.

I collected data from five purposefully sampled marketing leaders from three for-

profit, online, higher education institutions in the United States. I used a LinkedIn page

created explicitly for the study that identified my role as a doctoral candidate and

researcher to contact participants. I invited over 100 identified participants who met the

eligibility criteria through purposeful sampling until I gained consent from at least five

participants. While quantitative studies begin with a set number of participants,

qualitative studies are iterative, and the population can change throughout the process

(Levitt et al., 2021). I selected the interviewees purposefully based on meeting the

following eligibility requirements: (a) experience in for-profit, online higher education;

(b) being at the marketing manager level or above in their organization; and (c)

experience implementing strategies to increase student retention at a for-profit, online,

higher education institution. A semistructured interview process was employed to collect

data from participants to find common themes related to the research question.

To ensure data saturation, I continued to recruit participants to collect data until I

no longer found new themes in the data analysis process. Data saturation occurs when the

researcher no longer finds new ideas and themes shared by participants in the data collection process (Alam, 2020). I also reviewed publicly available documents for relevant information, including social media posts and the institutions' websites. I used multiple participants from multiple institutions to compare strategies and identify common themes for richer data collection. Data collection can stop once the researcher consistently identifies repetitive interview details through the coding process and supporting documents (Alam, 2020).

The interview setting chosen for this study was an online meeting platform. Once participants consented to the interview, I contacted them using my student email. We established an agreed-upon time to schedule the interview, and I sent an email to the participant with a link to the meeting that included the time. Jenner and Myers (2019) explained that online interviews have several benefits because they can be scheduled more easily than in-person interviews, accommodate busy working adults with families, and are cost effective. These benefits increased the opportunity of gaining access to more participants. I conducted the interviews on an online live meeting platform to have a greater opportunity to gain accessibility to participants, cost savings, and privacy. I ensured privacy by conducting the virtual interview in a private, indoor, home office space with a door that was closed, and no other individuals were within proximity of the area that could have heard the interview. I described my surroundings concerning privacy to the participant before starting the interview recording. I recommended that the participant consider completing the interview in a private area if it was feasible. If the participant required additional time to adjust to a private space, I would have

accommodated the interview time as needed. Jenner and Myers (2019) explained that online interviews offer more privacy than face-to-face interviews without compromising the quality of rapport. The interview protocol (see Appendix A) was followed in all interviews. The interviews were recorded so I could transcribe and analyze the participant's responses after the interview was complete.

Ethical Research

It is important to meet and uphold ethical standards in qualitative research for the safety and well-being of all parties involved. Walden University's code of ethics guided the ethical considerations for this study. The final doctoral manuscript is approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board and the approval number is 04-28-22-0037715. In accordance with maintaining ethical standards, I provided participants with a consent form to review and respond to with their written consent to participate. Participants should be aware of their role in the study in a detailed written form to provide their consent to the study (Saunders et al., 2015). The consent form also included details about an incentive offered as part of full participation in the study. I offered an incentive for this study because the semistructured interviews and requests for participants to review the transcript summary were time-consuming compared to a quantitative study where a survey or questionnaire is used for data collection. Once I completed the semistructured interview, I sent the incentive as an electronic gift card to the participant's email as stated in the consent form.

Participation in the study was voluntary, so participants had a right to withdraw from the study. Participants were notified before the interview that they could request to

withdraw during the interview by phone, text, or email until the study is published. I reminded participants that any data collected would remain confidential and not used for the study if they requested to withdraw.

Participants offering data and information to contribute to a research study are voluntary and should benefit from the privacy and protection of the researcher. Data I collected from this study are maintained safely with restricted permissions for 5 years to protect the rights of participants and under university policy. I did not include the names or other identifying information of individuals or organizations in the final study to maintain participant confidentiality. To protect participants' identities, I have maintained documents about the study, including interview recordings, typed transcript summaries, typed transcript reviews, data analysis from NVivo or excel, and notes and memos in a single secure online location that is password protected. A method of protecting participants' identities is to remove personally identifying information or information that will reveal the participant's identity from the transcripts before analyzing the data and only using information necessary to the integrity of the study (Saunders et al., 2014). For example, I used pseudonyms in the transcripts, coded A1, A2, and A3…, to replace the participant's full name. In addition, I removed any personally identifying information stated in the interview that included the names of the organizations or identifying information that was not relevant to the study while maintaining accuracy in data collection. Confidentiality involves removing participant identifiers during the data collection, analysis, and distribution (Kamanzi & Romania, 2019).

While email was necessary for this study, I always communicated with each participant separately, so a participant did not receive another participant's information. In addition, I created labeled folders for each participant with codes aligned to the pseudonym codes used in the transcripts, A1, A2, A3…, so that their email was not in my primary student email inbox where it could be mistakenly forwarded and reused. Using email throughout the research could be a risk to confidentiality if the email is forwarded (Saunders et al., 2015). Another method to help maintain confidentiality was to avoid sharing identifying information about other participants that could reveal their identity during a participant interview.

Data Collection Instruments

As the researcher, I was the primary data collection instrument. I collected data through semistructured interviews and publicly available documents. Available documents include online marketing advertisements, company performance outcomes, and analytics. A semistructured interview is designed to deeply understand what the participant is describing and the meaning (Saunders et al., 2015). I probed and asked open-ended questions to gain a profound understanding of relevant information to the research topic. Weller et al. (2018) explained that asking open-ended questions helps discover a further understanding of the topic and identify themes. Semistructured interviews include an introduction, research questions, probing, and clarifying questions (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). I used an interview protocol (see Appendix A) to conduct a professional semistructured interview appropriately.

I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure the reliability and validity of the data collection process. It is essential to interpret the data completely, accurately, and objectively to confirm reliability and validity (Saunders et al., 2015). The semistructured interview was conducted using an online meeting platform and recorded for later playback. Another technique to ensure reliability through accurate data collection is recording the interview. The participant gives permission, takes notes and memos, and transcribes the interview soon after the interview is completed (Saunders et al., 2015). I took notes and memos for topic areas in the discussion that I wanted to revisit and explore further with the participant or memos for my thoughts that I wanted to recall later about the interview. I ensured the validity of the data collected from the interviews with member checking by sharing a transcript summary with the participant by email to ensure an accurate interview representation. Member checking is the process in which the participant is involved in validating the interpretation of the data (Motulsky, 2021). Finally, I triangulated the data to ensure reliability and validity. Data triangulation is when the researcher uses multiple sources to collect data (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019). I triangulated data collected from the interviews and publicly available documentation, including social media posts and the institution's websites.

Data Collection Technique

The research question was: What marketing strategies do some for-profit online higher education marketing leaders in the United States use to increase student retention? The technique used to collect the data to answer the research question was through semistructured interviews with participants and a review of publicly available documents,

which were social media posts and university websites. Semistructured interviews ask open-ended questions and probe participants throughout the interview process to understand participants' reasons and attitudes about a phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2015). The advantage of conducting a semistructured interview was to gain an in-depth and detailed understanding from an expert in the field. A disadvantage of semistructured interviews was that transcribing and analyzing the data could be time-consuming. Also, there was a potential that participants may not be forthcoming with their responses. The advantage of using publicly available documentation to triangulate the data was identifying new themes or confirming no themes are found to ensure the credibility of the study results. The disadvantage of using publicly available documentation was that there was minimal available documentation relevant to the study.

I sent a participant invitation via LinkedIn to recruit eligible participants. I included the consent form to review and respond to their consent if they are interested in participating. I offered to answer questions and an overview of the study and consent form if requested by the prospective participant who was invited to contact me using the contact information listed on the invitation. Once the participant provided written consent, I established a mutually agreed-upon interview time with the participant and sent an online meeting invite using a virtual platform. Virtual meeting platforms offer participants the flexibility to select a private location (Jenner & Myers, 2019). On the day and time of the interview, I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to conduct the interview. Following the interview protocol guidelines (see Appendix A), I reviewed the information in the consent form. I informed the participant that I would be

interviewing in a private space where others would not hear their responses for their privacy. I recorded each interview which lasted less than 60 minutes.

I used member checking to ensure the credibility of the results by providing a transcript summary to participants to review for accuracy. The member checking process ensures the data's accuracy and validity (Motulsky, 2021). Next, I analyzed and coded the data in an excel spreadsheet using the NVivo data analysis tool to look for common themes and ideas. Nvivo helps to provide quality results when analyzing complex data in less time and effort than analyzing data manually (Alam, 2020). Finally, I triangulated the data from the interview with publicly available documents, including social media posts and the institution's websites. The triangulation method is achieved using several data collection methods to help identify data gaps (Alam, 2020). I continued the data collection process until I reached data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when no new themes, ideas, or concepts emerge from the data (Alam, 2020).

Data Organization Technique

I organized documents, data collection notes and logs, and other information used for the case study in a single archive that is password protected. The case study database is helpful to both the researcher and readers who want more information about the case (Yin, 2018). The database helps me provide a chain of evidence. For my study, the case study database helped gather and organize raw data and information so other readers can later recall the sequence of how I arrived at the study results. In addition to the semistructured interviews, a secondary source of data collection was publicly available

documentation, including social media posts and the institution's websites. I used data collection logs

to track the date, time, and brief description of all data collection and participant recruitment activities. Researchers must adhere to policies about handling personal information to protect participants and avoid maltreatment (Saunders et al., 2015). Therefore, I will maintain data from this study with restricted permissions for 5 years to protect the participants' rights and privacy and adhere to federal and university policies.

Data Analysis

The logical sequence for the data analysis process for this study began when I initially collected data from participants through transcribing recorded interview responses. Next, I compiled the data from the transcriptions using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to gain an initial understanding of the coding and themes. Saunders et al. (2015) explained that coding provides the researcher with the opportunity to arrange the data to prepare it for further analysis. Next, I used the NVivo data analysis tool to aid in organizing the data. Yin (2018) suggested that while tools such as NVivo will not offer a complete data analysis, the tool assists the researcher in organizing a high volume of data. Next, I used Yin's five phases of data analysis to compile, disassemble, reassemble, and interpret the data to present conclusions. First, I disassembled the data by dividing them into smaller fragments and then reassembled the data into categories with labels. Through disassembling and reassembling, I identified major themes and sub-themes. The themes were related to the constructs of relationship marketing which are the key mediating concepts of trust and commitment. Yin suggested that in addition to explaining the

rationale for the initial codes, they should also align with the research question. Therefore, the developed codes should be traced back to the overall intent of the research question. To support the study research question, I used data triangulation to triangulate the interviews and secondary data from verified publicly available documents, including social media posts and the institution's websites. Data triangulation allows the researcher to use multiple methods to achieve more robust results corroborated by various sources (Wilson, 2014). Finally, I interpreted this data and documented the conclusions.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

In a qualitative study, the researcher uses open-ended pre-determined questions so participants can provide their viewpoints with minimal constraints (Chenail, 2016). I ensured dependability on the study results through a rigorous review of the interview transcripts and member checking. Unbiased interpretation from respondents is essential to reliability (Morse, 2015). I mitigated bias by deriving themes from the transcripts that accurately represent the respondent's perspective by requesting the participant to check the transcript summary for accuracy. Reliability is dependent upon the research process's uniformity, including any biases from the researcher (Noble & Smith, 2015). I also used NVivo, the qualitative data analysis tool, to support my data analysis to assure dependability.

Validity

Validity is determined by the accuracy in how the results represent the data (Noble & Smith, 2015). Elements of validity include credibility, transferability,

confirmability, and data saturation. Credibility is a study component that should relay the study's essence through the participants' lens (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). For credibility, I analyzed the audio recordings from the interviews and the transcriptions to synthesize the participants described experiences. A researcher should review transcripts to find common trends between the participants (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I provided a copy of the typed interview summary to review and provide feedback on the accuracy of interpretation. Member checking gives the participant the researcher's understanding of the data to confirm trustworthiness (FitzPatrick, 2019).

I ensured that the research was transferable by providing context for the study and how it applies to future research. For example, many prior studies focus on relationship marketing in the context of service industries. I expand this focus to the education industry in this study. However, the study findings may have limited transferability due to the qualitative nature of a small sample population of for-profit online higher education marketing leaders. Therefore, future researchers should determine how to use the results to expand the research for future studies. For example, Thomas and Magilvy (2011) described a way to achieve transferability by ensuring a detailed description of the study's population, including the statistical characteristics of the people and the study's physical limitations.

A study is confirmed when it has achieved credibility, transferability, and dependability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I ensured confidence in the data by developing an audit trail of the study steps available for future researchers. Methods to ensure confirmability include the researcher constantly examining any personal bias and

thoughts regarding the investigation (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I took notes on the unique insights and perceptions to ensure they do not interfere with the confirmability of the study. Further, the researcher should use probing methods and allow the participant to lead the researcher through their experience (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I probed and asked clarifying questions from different perspectives where necessary so that the participant could expand on their experience. I also used data triangulation from publicly available records, including social media posts and institution websites, to strengthen the validity of the results. Data triangulation uses several sources to measure the same event (Yin, 2018).

FitzPatrick (2019) posited that validity is required to trust the study's outcomes. An additional method to achieve reliability is to ensure data saturation is reached. An element of validation is to arrive at a point in the study where new information is not being found (FitzPatrick, 2019). I ensured data saturation by continuing to interview more participants until I no longer found further information, themes, or ideas in the data collection. FitzPatrick posited that a valid conclusion could not be made if data saturation was not achieved.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a restatement of the purpose of the study, an explanation of the role of the researcher, participant criteria and eligibility, research method and design, population and sampling method, and ethical considerations. I also reviewed the data collection instrument and techniques and how data are organized and analyzed. Finally, I

concluded Section 2 with a review of the reliability and validity of the data collected in this study.

In Section 3, I will share the results of the study. First, I will share how the findings from this study can be applied to professional practice and the implications for social change. Next, I will recommend actions for the target audience, marketing leaders at for-profit online higher education institutions. Next, I will offer recommendations for further research and reflect on the overall study. Finally, I will offer a conclusion and end the document with references and an appendix that will contain additional information relative to the study's data collection procedures.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

In this qualitative, multiple case study, I explored marketing strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online higher education. The data were gathered in interviews with marketing leaders and the review of publicly available documents, such as social media platforms and university websites. The findings showed strategies that marketing leaders used to increase student retention in for-profit, online higher education.

I used NVivo data analysis software to code the data and Microsoft Excel to organize the data, develop themes and subthemes, and link the data to constructs in the conceptual framework. The four themes that emerged from the data collection were (a) marketing strategies to increase student retention, (b) online experience, (c) key challenges, and (d) retention value. An additional eight subthemes emerged from the first theme of marketing strategies to increase student retention: (a) communication strategies, (b) personalized experience, (c) channels, (d) sense of community, (e) customer experience, (d) customer engagement, (f) brand sentiment, and (g) measure. I also identified key quotes from participants relevant to the study, research question, and conceptual framework. Finally, I used tables to illustrate typical subthemes.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was: What marketing strategies do some for-profit, online, higher education marketing leaders in the United States use to increase student retention? I interviewed five marketing leaders with experience implementing marketing strategies to increase student retention in for-profit, online higher education.

Participants each had different marketing roles and areas of expertise, which offered a broad perspective on the topic. I also triangulated the interview data with publicly available documents, including social media posts and university websites. The publicly available documents mainly supported the data from the interviews.

I transcribed the interview recordings and analyzed the data in Microsoft Excel and NVivo data analysis software. The thematic analysis results supported constructs of the commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing, which was the conceptual framework of this study. In interviews, participants shared strategies they implemented to increase student retention, barriers to increasing student retention, ways to overcome barriers, organizational structure, and critical challenges. Participants noted, based on their expertise as marketing leaders, that there is an opportunity for higher education leaders to focus on and invest in student retention to improve both financial and student outcomes. In this subsection, I present the findings of the study by theme and subtheme.

Theme 1: Marketing Strategies to Increase Student Retention

The initial theme derived from participant responses was marketing strategies to increase student retention. An additional eight subthemes emerged from this primary theme: (a) communications strategies, (b) personalized experience, (c) channels, (d) sense of community, (e) customer experience, (d) customer engagement, (f) brand sentiment, and (g) measure. Participants shared strategies to increase student retention, including the channels used and measuring methods. Common strategies used were using student groups to increase a student's sense of community, taking measures to improve and

understand the customer experience, the importance of brand in creating shared values, and strategies to increase customer engagement.

Participants commonly shared the importance of students feeling connected to the institution. For example, Participant A2 recommended higher education marketing leaders "Create experiences, feel a part of the community, provide tools to be successful. Understand students better, and we need to be able to personalize their experience so that they feel understood and heard and that they belong here." Participant A3 shared a similar sentiment by stating that:

The more engaged and connected someone feels to the institution, it increases retention rates and the ability for them to want to keep going. And to be proud of that degree they earned at the end of their journey. And frankly, it can also result in returning for another degree.

In the following subsections, I will review the subthemes in detail, along with their link to the conceptual framework and literature.

Theme 1, Subtheme 1: Communications Strategies

The first subtheme that emerged from four participants (80%) was communication strategies used to retain students. Participant A2 discussed the importance of preparing incoming students before the start of class. Students were prepared by communicating to them how to post a discussion or submit their assignment, get financial aid in place, ensure that they attend orientation, join a student Facebook group, buy their books, register for classes, or pay their bills. Participant A3 discussed clear and concise

communications so that it was easy for students to take the necessary action, such as registering for classes.

Participant A3 discussed strategies to improve email communication with compelling subject lines and a clear call to action within the email so students know where to go to register. Participant A5 also discussed proactive outreach triggered when students struggled in their program and communications to remind them to register and offer planning tools; hence, students stay ahead of their administrative tasks. Participant A3 stressed transparency in communications and explained that fewer emails with less content and better designs performed better than longer emails. Participant A3 also stated that misinformation or lack of transparency in communications could have a negative impact on students by sharing, "It could be something as simple as not having the clarity of how long the degree program was going to take, but for whatever reason, it wasn't getting communicated directly to them." Participant A4 discussed the importance of students understanding the financial aid process and how to pay for tuition. The goal is to make this information consumable for the student, so it is not overwhelming.

The communication subtheme links to the conceptual framework because communication is an antecedent to trust in the communication-trust theory. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explained that communication influences trust when a party perceives that the quality of communication is adequate, including being relevant, timely, and reliable. Trust is the key construct of Morgan and Hunt's relationship marketing theory. As the literature describes, trust is established when one party perceives that the other party consistently acts with integrity, demonstrating expertise, reliability, compassion, honesty,

and fairness (Sheikh et al., 2021). Participant A3 explained that misinformation could erode trust. In higher education, communicating information to students about how to fund their education and the financial aid process is essential, and students want truthful and accurate information.

Theme 1, Subtheme 2: Personalized Experience

In the second subtheme, three participants (60%) discussed the importance of creating a personalized experience that is unique to the individual student. Participant A2 explained that one of the strategies they focused on was creating personalized outreach by understanding what is unique and special about each student. They explained that this typically resulted in a higher retention rate. Examples of different segmentations included students who had no prior college experience, no prior online learning experience, or returning students looking for an additional degree. To support this, Participant A2 stated, "We need to understand our students better, and we need to be able to personalize their experience so that they feel understood and heard and that they belong here." Additionally, Participant A2 explained, "No two students are the same. They don't have the same situation. They don't have the same needs. And so having a one size fits all model for student retention doesn't work." Participant A3 explained the approach for personalization was to tell the student about the university at the beginning of the relationship, and as the student progresses, to continue personalizing the outreach based on their wants and needs. Participant A3 explained that it is essential to understand the suitable mediums and content to contact students based on the action they want them to take, saying, "I think the common mistake marketers make is that they're so intent on

pushing their messaging. That they do not understand how that messaging meets, you know, the students' needs or their wants." Participant A5 explained, "put yourselves in their shoes and understand the best way to reach them and the messaging that will best connect with them. I think that's a key component missing in for-profit marketing."

A personalized experience is a way to enhance a customer's experience and increase their satisfaction. When a customer is satisfied, they are more likely to retain. The findings extend the knowledge on student satisfaction in higher education. Do and Vu (2020) described customer satisfaction as a measure of how businesses meet and exceed customer expectations using their products and services. Participant statements on personalization link to the conceptual framework because Morgan and Hunt's (1994) communications construct is an antecedent to trust, which consists of the ability to provide excellent customer service. As described in the literature, Ogunmokun et al. (2021) explained that each student has unique needs. The authors found that the ability to customize and personalize the experience would increase customer well-being.

Theme 1, Subtheme 3: Channels

In the third subtheme, all participants (100%) shared their experience with channels used to engage with students. The distance learning format requires the institution to focus on different channels and modes of delivering instruction and support services (Radovan, 2019). The most used channel to communicate with students and discussed by four participants was email. Participant A2 explained the importance of the channel used by stating:

They want to know that we care about them. They don't want to be a number. We

need to be able to provide options for students so that they can communicate

when and how is comfortable for them, not when and how it's comfortable for us.

Table 1 represents the references to channels mentioned by participants to communicate

with students.

Table 1

References to Channels Used

Participant	Email	Text	Phone	Facebook	YouTube	Classroom	Portal	Webinar	Direct Mail
A1					X			X	
A2	X	X	X	X		X	X		
A3	X	X							
A4	X			X				X	
A5	X	X	X			X		X	X

The link to the conceptual framework is communication, which is the antecedent

to trust. Marketing professionals determine which channels to use depending on the goal

of the interaction to achieve the highest level of engagement. Communication influences

trust when a party perceives that the quality of communication is adequate, including

being relevant, timely, and reliable (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

The findings extend the knowledge in the discipline because recent studies have

indicated that the method of interacting with a customer in an online environment is

important. Radovan (2019) explained that the distance learning format requires the

institution to focus on different channels and modes of delivering instruction and support

services. Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) reported that distance education offers flexibility, autonomy, and heavy reliance on digital platforms to enhance student performance. In addition, the authors stated that using technology brings the teacher and student closer together and improves communication and collaboration.

Theme 1, Subtheme 4: Sense of Community

Participants described that while online students want flexibility, they still want a university connection. Participant A3 shared that institutional leaders must understand how to offer that engagement in a flexible, online format and how the student needs it. One of the ways Participant A3 described helping students connect was to create an online community for various student organizations, such as military and pride, where students could connect online. Participant A3 stated, "we wanted them to build that connection and identity to the university through those student organizations." As a result, online communities using social media platforms were created, which the students managed with a moderator from the university. Steinhoff et al. (2019) recommended social media as platforms where customers can engage, provide feedback, and act as cocreators, positively affecting retention and engagement.

Participants A3 and A5 explained that in a brick-and-mortar institution, students could see one another at any time by visiting one another in the dorm room, cafeteria, or sporting event. Since those opportunities are not available in an online school, creating that connected environment is more challenging. Furthermore, since online students are working adults with competing priorities, their time is limited to spend on planned activities outside of coursework.

Participant A4 discussed a campaign used to build a sense of community for students, saying that the university supported an alumnus in their mission-driven work and then tell the story of the alumni through a multichannel campaign that included videos and articles. The campaign included virtual events where students could interact with experts on their subject matter. Participant A4 explained, "that sense of community, seeing how others were impacting the community to give them kind of that energizing boost maybe, to keep moving." When I asked Participant A4 to offer more detail on why they believed this campaign to be successful, they shared the following,

> I think that they felt very involved in them and that they were seeing their peers succeed. I often think when you can connect with somebody who is within that campaign, it's very powerful because that connection draws that person in, and it makes them feel like they can do it as well.

Participant A3 described a campaign focused on diversity and inclusion that included profiles of students and alumni promoted through events, webinars, photos, and videos to celebrate the student demographics and diversity and inclusion. Participant A3 discussed receiving feedback from a student proud of the university for highlighting issues relevant to their community.

The link to the conceptual framework is relationship termination cost, which is the antecedent to commitment. Morgan and Hunt (1994) explained that relationship termination costs are the totality of what the party expects to lose from ending the relationship and switching to an alternative. For example, if the student has a sense of belonging and feels they are a part of a community, there is a higher cost of leaving the

community. Therefore, when deciding to switch, the customer considers monetary, nonmonetary, and psychological factors (Sheikh et al., 2021).

The findings confirm the literature because building a sense of belonging and connection to the university helps develop commitment. Rather (2019) explained affective commitment occurs when a customer desires to remain in the relationship because they feel a sense of belonging and a pleasurable experience. Muljana and Luo (2019) described techniques to increase student retention, including effective student engagement, increasing students' sense of belonging, instructor teaching methods, and course design. In addition, the authors indicated that a student's sense of belonging is critical to success. Therefore, developing extra support and activities to engage a student will aid in improving a student's sense of belonging (Russell & Jarvis, 2019).

Theme 1, Subtheme 5: Customer Experience

Modern consumers are more inclined to care about the end-to-end service experience than past generations (Putra & Putri, 2019). Improving students' experience through interactions and touchpoints with the university is a critical factor in student retention. Through monitoring, measuring, and identifying areas of opportunity, participants shared strategies to improve the student experience in various stages of their journey. Participant A5 noted:

> We have to work extra hard to ensure that they see that value quickly, whether through excellent professors or an excellent student services model or whatever the case might be, proving that value could be a challenge, especially at a high-priced institution.

For example, Participant A3 described a situation where the marketing team recognized that students could not access one of their platforms on their mobile phones. When they updated the platform for mobile accessibility, they recognized an increase in student action. Understanding the student's needs helped identify areas of opportunity to provide a flexible experience. Participant A3 explained, "they just didn't find themselves sitting in front of a computer or a laptop to do these things. Primarily they were using tablets or iPads or their phone."

Participants A3 and A5 discussed strategies to support students in successfully advancing from their first and second courses. Participant A5 explained that phone calls were placed the day before class wishing students good luck and asking if they needed anything. In the first term, students received reminders via email and text message to complete administrative tasks such as registration and course planning tools which continue each term. Participant A5 explained that new student orientation was promoted to the student every term. The purpose of this was to reacclimate students with the university's services, citing that:

> They're often working professionals with families, et cetera, and they have competing priorities. So, they may take a term or two and then need to take a term off due to a sick parent or take another few terms and then have a baby or whatever the case might be. So, we find that because they're not consistent, orientation allows them to come back and remind themselves. This is how I get to the library. This is how I use the writing center. This is how I can get support from things this might have changed since the last time I was here.

While sharing experiences from two different institutions, Participants A1 and A5 shared a similar strategy to develop a cohort experience for undergraduate students starting with minimal prior college or online learning experience. Participant A1 said the program would have dedicated support staff and a shared experience with peers who had similar educational experiences. This way, students would not feel isolated and behind those with more college and online experience. Participant A4 described a similar program where students with little to no prior college experience would be offered the skills needed, such as time management and basic college skills, to succeed. Participant 4 explained, "when you're going in virtually, and you have no previous experience, it can be extremely overwhelming and was causing people to drop." The cohort approach described by Participants A1 and A4 suggests that the universities designed a personalized approach specific to the customer needs. Improving service quality will increase customer satisfaction, attract new customers, and company profitability. (Sugama & Sukaatmadja, 2020).

Participant A2 discussed ways the marketing team worked to influence changes to the classroom experience. As Participant A5 explained, as marketers, they did not have decision-making in the classroom experience. However, they recommended ways to improve the student experience for academic staff. Participant A2 shared that teaching instruction should be creative and innovative to be interesting and exciting for students. In addition, they attempted to work with faculty on helping students in the first term, such as responsiveness to students. They recommended that faculty respond to student emails within 24 hours and when grading assignments to provide helpful feedback on what the

student did well and what they can do to improve. Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019)

recommended that instructors offer effective communication by providing sincere

feedback, summarizing a student's response, and responding more than once a week.

The link to the conceptual framework is communication which is the antecedent

to commitment. Communication includes providing service that meets customer

expectations. The findings confirm the knowledge in the discipline by explaining that

experience is an important factor in retention. Quality service in the service industry that

is continuously improved is critical to customer loyalty and a company's ongoing

financial success. (Nora, 2019; Putra & Putri, 2019). In higher education, Snijders et al.

(2020) explained that when students demonstrate loyalty, they will participate in positive

behaviors such as staying enrolled, recommending the school to other students, or being

more engaged with the university, enhancing the university outcomes. Therefore,

improving service quality is essential in increasing student commitment and loyalty. Gay

and Betts (2020) explained that as higher education enrollments continue to grow,

academic quality and the student experience must be fundamental to learning instruction.

Theme 1, Subtheme 6: Customer Engagement

Participants A1, A2, and A4 (60%) share strategies to keep students engaged

throughout their program. Participant A1 implemented a YouTube campaign to curate

relatable content for students, using real student stories. For example, the stories would

show how a student went on to build a business and what it took for them to achieve their

goals. Participant A1 noted, "it was related to the class they were taking, the curriculum,

and the learning outcomes." As the researcher, I viewed the publicly available content on

YouTube and confirmed that the campaign contained the content described. The goal was to create binge-able content like Netflix streaming services where students could continuously engage with the channel. The campaign was measured through visits, clicks, subscriptions, and time on the page. Participant A2 stated:

> They work with Amazon, and they work with Verizon, and they work with Netflix, and they want a similar experience in there, not just an education, but in everything that they do, they want to be able to access things via their smartphones and their tablets.

Participant A1 compared marketing activities to retain students to loyalty programs typically found in retail and hospitality. Participant A1 described a retention initiative as a loyalty and rewards program to keep students motivated throughout their program. The incentive was that students could earn a free course for every set number of courses they completed, and the progress towards the goal was shown in a game-like view on their student portal to keep students motivated to continue. Participant A1 recommended that universities use the rewards approach to celebrate student milestones using badges, such as recognizing submitting an assignment or achievement in a course.

Participant A4 discussed maintaining a relationship with a student beyond their degree program. The participant described a campaign where they sent an invitation to students to explore the next opportunity for a degree or certificate when they neared the end of their current program. They also explained having a robust alumni program focused on retaining a student for life. Yeggn (2021) found that the customer became dependent on the brand based on these relational experiences such as proactive customer

outreach, monitoring customer purchase behaviors, rewards programs, and customer

cocreation.

As identified by participants, implementing campaigns to engage the student is a

factor in increasing a student's sense of belonging and reducing a feeling of isolation.

The link to the conceptual framework is commitment and trust gained through

communication. Student engagement is determined by how deeply involved a student is

in their institution's experience (Tight, 2020). For example, using social media platforms

to connect students with peers is a method to engage students in an online format. The

peer connection and activity increase students' sense of community and belonging.

Affective commitment occurs when relationship benefits increase commitment, such as

the party establishing a sense of belonging and connection to the organization (Setyawan

et al., 2019).

The findings confirm the knowledge in the discipline because several recent

studies indicate that engagement activities positively impact retention. For example,

Steinhoff et al. (2019) recommended social media as platforms where customers can

engage, provide feedback and act as cocreators, positively affecting retention and

engagement. Radovan (2019) recommended that higher education leaders focus on

motivating students, delivering engaging content, and improving social interaction

between students and teachers to drive retention. Russell and Jarvis (2019) recommended

developing extra support and activities to engage a student will aid in improving a

student's sense of belonging. Steinhoff et al. recommended social media as platforms

where customers can engage, provide feedback and act as co-creators, positively

affecting retention and engagement. Other techniques include effective student engagement, increasing students' sense of belonging, instructor teaching methods, and course design (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Radovan recommended that higher education leaders focus on motivating students, delivering engaging content, and improving social interaction between students and teachers to drive retention.

Theme 1, Subtheme 7: Brand Sentiment

Amoako (2019) found that achieving a solid bond to the brand aligned with affective commitment is more valuable than reducing termination costs. Participants A1, A3, and A4 (60%) explained that brand plays an important role in student retention. Participant A1 noted, "I think that it can lend a sense of pride for your school…understanding what your university stands for and can help you achieve." Participant A3 stated, "brand sentiment is so incredibly important, and that's how you create that brand loyalty and engagement." Participant A4 explained the brand team was "focused on making sure that the university had a unified look, feel on voice, and that was carried out through all marketing materials."

Participant A4 agreed by explaining that the brand team ensured that students felt like they were in a quality program. They explained that the brand team also focused on portraying a positive image of the university, which was important, especially in cases where there was negative press about the university or industry. Participant 4 disclosed:

> They were able to see a clear path forward for them in their program and that they weren't feeling nervous or scared that that would ultimately affect their ability at the end of their program to get a job or to graduate.

Amoako (2019) explained that brand equity determines a brand's power in the market, which occurs with the effective implementation of relationship marketing.

The link to the conceptual framework is shared values which are the antecedent to commitment and trust. When two parties share values, they are more likely to be committed to the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). A company can demonstrate shared values through the company brand. The findings confirm the knowledge in the discipline. Amoako (2019) explained that a company demonstrates its values consistently through behaviors, actions, and interactions with the customer. Shared values happen when the customer and company have common goals (Amoako, 2019). When two parties share values, it makes it easier to bond, communicate and cooperate, which results in trust and commitment. Working towards a common goal helps foster a committed relationship.

Theme 1, Subtheme 8: Measure

Measuring the success of marketing strategies provides marketers with insights into what campaigns and initiatives are effective in achieving their goals. First, it is important to identify the goals of the strategies. The participants mentioned several goals. The first was the campaign's effectiveness measured through the student's engagement with the channels used to implement the campaign. The subsequent measurement was the students' progress or the student taking the desired action as requested by the campaign. The final measurement was what the student retained, measured by their persistence into the following term through graduation.

Participants A1 and A5 explained that they monitored progression throughout the program, such as moving from one term to another. Participants A2, A3, and A5 explained that emails were measured based on a student opening the email and clicking on the content. Participants A2, A4, and A5 discussed measuring event registration and attendance. Participants A2 and A3 noted that they measured students' interaction with web properties, such as what they clicked on and viewed. They also measured student milestones and progress throughout the program. In terms of measuring student action, Participant A2 explained some actions, such as if a student registered for a class, obtained financial aid, spoke to an advisor, then how many attended the first day of class.

Participants A2, A3, and A5 also shared the importance of gathering qualitative measurements. Participants A2 and A3 explained that monitoring student discussions in social groups provided valuable insights into student wants and needs. Participant A3 shared:

> You get a lot of data there that wouldn't normally be said in a survey, so to speak, they feel they can talk more freely in an environment with their peers. It's just great data to really kind of comb through and figure out what the pain points are or what the things are doing well.

Participant A2 agreed with this statement by noting, "knowing what they're struggling with, where what they're excited about." Participant A5 explained gathering qualitative feedback by asking advisors who communicate with students. Another measurement strategy Participant A5 explained was to send a short survey to students who did not register to ask them why.

The measurement subtheme was identified by participants to implement marketing strategies effectively. Measurement is used to understand customer behaviors and satisfaction and identify effective methods to increase customer engagement and improve service quality. Customer satisfaction is a measure to determine or describe how a product or service meets a customer's expectations (Sleiman et al., 2021). While measurement is not directly linked to the conceptual framework, it is an essential step in the effective implementation of the conceptual framework.

The subtheme is supported by the literature described by Latif et al. (2019). The authors posited that higher education institutions must explore how to improve customer perceived service quality due to increased demand in the market. Latif et al.'s goal were to develop a model for higher education leaders to measure service quality and prioritize strategies to stay competitive in higher education. The authors emphasized the importance of continuous measures to evaluate service quality, recommending dedicated resources to support the effort.

Theme 2: Online Experience

For-profit higher education institutions offer courses, vocational programs, and all degree programs that are more accessible to students unable to enroll in a traditional university setting (Muljana & Luo, 2019). There are benefits for students to achieve their educational goals in an online university setting. However, there needs to be attention given to the profile of an online student and the different measures that an online university should take to engage students, given the mode of learning places students at a

distance from the university staff and peers. In addition, the demographics of students who enroll in online and for-profit institutions differ from traditional on-campus or not-for-profit institutions (Guzman et al., 2021; Hodgman, 2018; Santos, 2020).

All participants confirmed the literature and shared their perspective the online student is "different" than a student that attends a traditional face-to-face university setting. Participant A2 stated, "We serve a different population." Participant A2 agreed, "Our student body looks different than some other universities," as well as Participant A5, "an online student is a different type of student than a face-to-face student and has different requirements and needs. Participants A3 and A5 explained that students who enroll in online higher education programs are adult working professionals with other responsibilities besides school, such as work and family. Students who enroll in online programs are typically older, are married, have children, and consist of more minority and female students with a lower income than campus or nonprofit institutions Guzman et al. (2021). The benefit of online education for this population of students is its flexibility, allowing adult working professionals to advance personally and professionally. In addition, online education allows flexible asynchronous learning from any location (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019).

Participants explained that adult working professionals with families need flexibility in their learning experience, not only in the classroom but with other services the institution offers. For example, for-profit higher education institutions offer courses, vocational programs, and all levels of degree programs that are more accessible to students unable to enroll in a traditional university setting (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Participant A3 stated, "they are less into getting phone calls cause they're so busy, there's never really a good time to reach them. typically, they're working during the day and then after the fact they're taking care of families." Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) explained that distance education offers flexibility, autonomy, and heavy reliance on digital platforms to enhance student performance.

While the flexibility of online learning is ideal for working adults with families, they also require adequate support to be successful and delivered in a way that meets their needs. Especially since the online student has likely had a period that they have not been in school, have no online experience, or no prior college experience. Participant A2 noted, "the student over here is going to need a different level of support and communication and outreach than the student over there." Participant A5 stated:

> They have a lot of responsibilities, so they may require more check-ins, they may require a little more flexibility in the class. They may require, more services in some regards for things. Also, some of them have been out of school for a long time, so need refreshers on how to use the library or writing centers.

Participant A4 added that students who did not have prior college experience need to be provided tools and support from the school to keep them focused. They further explained that students who did not have a certain number of credits had a higher likelihood of dropping out after the first year. Due to the high attrition rates from this population, the institution decided not to target prospects in this population at some point. Participant A2 and Support services are critical aspects of online education. Participant A2 explained

that student expectations for their experience are similar to their expectations as a consumer:

> They work with Amazon, and they work with Verizon, and they work with Netflix and they want a similar experience in there, not just an education, but in everything that they do, they want to be able to access things via their smartphones and their tablets, students are becoming more and more tech savvy. 'We're accredited' isn't enough anymore to get people here, and it's not enough to get people to stay here. And so maybe 15 years ago, that was okay and that might've been enough, but it's not enough anymore.

Participants A2 and A3 discussed competition in terms of student options. Both participants explained that students have more options for education in a competitive marketplace. Participant A2 said, "they have a lot of choices and their expectations are higher and higher in terms of what they get back in return" and Participant A3 noted, "If they don't have a good experience, they'll leave, and the world has made it a lot easier to leave and to transfer and do what you need to do there." When deciding to switch, the customer considers monetary, non-monetary, and psychological factors (Sheikh et al., 2021).

The link to the conceptual framework is communication, the antecedent to trust, and increasing relationship benefits, which is the antecedent to commitment. In the communication antecedent, the university gains trust by aligning perceptions and expectations for the students. For example, when enrolling in an online program, students expect that the institution is versed in meeting a consumer's online experience

expectations. Relationship benefits are perceived when the party gains benefits such as pricing, customer service, and product excellence above and beyond their competitors, enhancing their commitment to the relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

Studies in the literature review describe the importance of distinguishing the online experience in the service industry. For example, Al-Hawari (2022) found that increasing loyalty and trust with online banking customers involves developing an experience that meets customer expectations. Likewise, Vlachopoulos and Makri (2019) explored the multidimensional aspect of online learning and highlighted how to improve communication and interaction in online learning environments in higher education. Online learning provides flexible learning at a distance, so it is even more important to use effective communication to avoid pitfalls such as a student feeling lonely.

Theme 3: Key Challenges

The marketing professionals participating in the study shared marketing strategies they implemented to increase student retention. However, participants shared common barriers to implementing marketing strategies to increase student retention. The barriers described are (a) leadership support, (b) resources, (c) decentralized efforts, and (d) organizational structure, illustrated in Table 2. Organizational support was the most mentioned barrier among participants.

Table 2

References to Key Challenges

Participant	Leadership Support	Resources	Decentralized Efforts	Organizational Structure
A1	X		X	X
A2	X	X	X	X
A3	X	X	X	X
A4		X		X
A5	X	X	X	X

Leadership Support

Participants A1, A2, and A3 discussed leadership support as critical to successfully implementing retention strategies. Participant A1 explained that someone at the highest level of the organization has the vision and passion for focusing on student retention, citing that a bottom-up approach would take longer to move forward. Participant A2 explained that implementing the marketing strategies described could not have been done successfully without leadership support. Participant A1 also explained that having a long-term vision and goal is essential to the university's mission. Participant A2 explained that prioritizing a new student over a continuing student was the greatest challenge. Participant A3 hoped that higher education leaders understand the importance of investing in student marketing and communications. Participant A5 explained:

> There needs to be a much greater investment in students because it's such an uneven balance between the approach towards prospects and the importance of current students. It's something that I think is an issue across many universities, not mainly just a profit. Still, in general, I would say it's a bigger problem in for-profit just because they have so many more students that they deal with, in terms

of staffing, budget, and resources overwhelmingly, that goes towards prospects, not our students.

While participants had experienced the successful implementation of marketing strategies to increase student retention, they recognized that there are opportunities for growth in this area. For example, Bardauskaite (2014) found that customers require satisfaction with the holistic service quality and not just one-off service experiences to achieve loyalty.

Resources

Having the resources to support retention marketing for current students was another barrier. Participants A2 and A3 explained that having adequate funding was a challenge. All participants (100%) explained that there was limited staffing for retention marketing efforts. Participant A3 explained that there was an uneven balance in terms of resources put towards prospective students than continuing, "Overwhelming majority of resources are going towards prospective, not enrolled students. Our institution was woefully underrepresented in terms of student engagement. I think there was so much more that we could have done that we didn't." Three Participants, A1, A3, and A5, used the word "dedicated" when describing the desire for resources, stating that they recommend that there are dedicated teams and individuals focused on student retention.

Decentralized Efforts

Participants A1, A2, A4, and A5 (90%) described challenges with decentralized efforts for student retention marketing. In addition, Participant A5 explained the lack of

role clarity between marketing and academics in implementing marketing and communications strategies:

> Tension between marketing, handling some of that stuff and the academic units, outreaching and handling some of that stuff. Many of them feel like it's within their scope and that marketing should not be involved. Once a student is a student, we should be hands-off and that sort of thing. And I think there's some merit to that meaning absolutely the academic units play a huge role and should be involved, but sometimes, well, a lot of times they aren't marketers.

Additionally, Participant A5 explained the value of allowing marketers to play a role in student retention marketing by stating:

> That tends to be a struggle because we have some (academic) units that say, we'll handle it on our own, but I think the more consistent campaign that you have or outreach that you have the better. They may not have the tools in which to communicate effectively or utilize text messaging in the right way or things like that. I think the marketing side can bring a lot to the table in terms of market research and information and things about the population and then partner with the academic unit to see how they might be able to change their policies or their service level to cater to the current student.

Participant A2 explained department silos as a challenge in retention marketing efforts. They explained that retention was handled across multiple teams, making it challenging to align and ensure that students received consistent communications. Participant A3 explained that department silos could cause a student to receive a high

volume of messages from different departments, which could lose the effectiveness of the channel.

Organizational Structure

In terms of the marketing structure to support marketing efforts to increase student retention, all participants (100%) described a more extensive marketing department focused on attracting new students aligned under one department and leader. In contrast, all participants explained that while the marketing department was involved in initiatives for student retention marketing, it was not a formal integrated part of their processes. For example, Participants A1, A2, and A5 explained that one team managed the relationship with a prospect and then handed off that relationship to academic staff for continuing student support. In addition, Participants A2, A3, and A4 describe marketing roles dedicated to prospects and students.

Participant A3 explained that while continuing students could benefit from the university website, it was designed to attract new students. Marketing focuses on navigating students to the institution's main website to learn about the university, understand which program to choose, what their career aspirations and goals are, and help them through the application process to reserve their seats at the university.

All participants described their marketing departments as having areas consistent with traditional corporate marketing structures such as brand, media, web, creative, social media, events, and communications. The participants also explained that the departments focused on attracting new prospective students. Participant A3 described the marketing structure as focusing on brand awareness for new leads and cultivating those leads into

applying and enrolling at the university. They described the marketing department as having about 30 staff members dedicated to attracting new students. There were less than five individuals for enrolled students, and they were not necessarily dedicated positions or on the same team. Like Participant A3, Participant A2 explained that while there was a marketing organization of approximately 100 staff members to market to new students, a few people focused on marketing and communications for current students. Participant A4 described the marketing department as consisting of approximately 150 staff members. The team dedicated to continuing students consisted of about five individuals. Participant A4 explained that the marketing team worked to ensure brand integration throughout the experience so the university had a unified look, feel, and voice.

The key challenges to implementing retention strategies to increase student retention described by participants were (a) leadership support, (b) resources, (c) decentralized efforts, and (d) organizational structure. The commitment-trust theory of relationship marketing is designed to develop trust and commitment through all company interactions with the customer. If the organization's structure is decentralized, the customer will likely have an inconsistent experience which can erode trust and commitment. Further, if there is more emphasis on marketing to attract students, and the experience changes once enrolled, this could erode trust. According to the constructs of the conceptual framework for this study, when the customer identifies opportunistic behavior, then trust is negatively impacted.

The findings extend the knowledge on viewing the student as a customer. Guilbault (2018) explained that understanding the role of the student as a customer is

essential to stay competitive in the higher education sector, and the idea that the student is

not a customer should no longer exist. The author explained that marketing requires

understanding the customer; Therefore, defining the student as a customer is critical

because a customer influences many practices. The author argues that when students are

not treated as customers by their higher education institutions, they are not receiving

customer service. Finally, the author explained that if customer orientation is related to

customer satisfaction, increased customer orientation will lead to increased retention and

graduation, a goal in the higher education industry. Since faculty plays a vital role in

student satisfaction, and if not ready to take a customer-centric approach to students, this

could be an issue that needs attention.

Theme 4: Retention Value

Participants A1, A3, and A5 discussed the value of investing in marketing

strategies to increase student retention. Participant A1 explained that it is a significant

opportunity to "change the game" and an "incredible opportunity for a university to be

very successful." Participant A3 explained that in a competitive market, students do not

just leave; they go to another university if they do not have a good experience.

Participants A1 and A5 detailed the cost of recruiting a student compared to

retaining a student. Since marketing models show that it is less expensive to retain a

customer than attract a new one, higher education institutions are encouraged to use

marketing practices to achieve success (Guilbault, 2018). According to Participant A5, if

a student leaves the university because of an unsatisfactory experience, the university has

to spend money finding a new student instead of the revenue gained from a satisfied

student who is staying for the duration of their program. They explained that the cost of investing in retaining current students is more financially beneficial to the university than the cost of recruiting new students:

> It just costs more to recruit a student than to keep them here, universities, in general, but so much emphasis on recruitment of students, which is extremely important, of course, but they tend to put less emphasis on the retention of students, which is mind-boggling when you think about it, because it costs so much to recruit a student that, you know, without retention strategies, you're just increasing the cost that you're putting out.

Participant A1 was in alignment with this concept explaining the following:

> The longer they stay, the higher their lifetime value. If they drop out, they have little to no lifetime value. So if you spend money to get the student in the door and they only stay for a quarter, think about the expense to acquire, teach, and subtract this, and has it been a profit or a loss?

> Participants A1 and A5 discussed how retention marketing for current students is essential for acquiring new customers. Participant A1 noted, "If you retain a student and give them a good experience, that cycles back to you having a recruitment strategy through word of mouth and happy students that can recruit more students on your behalf." Sugama and Sukaatmadja (2020) concluded that increased customer satisfaction leads to customers recommending services. Conversely, indifferent customers are less likely to share their experiences, and dissatisfied customers are more likely to share their negative experiences publicly. The authors point out that customers who may not be

satisfied at the beginning of the relationship are likely to share a positive experience if the company handles complaints to their satisfaction. Improving service quality will increase customer satisfaction, attract new customers, and company profitability. (Sugama & Sukaatmadja, 2020). Participant A5 disclosed, "if you focus on retention and create a great experience for somebody, you end up creating a resource that could help you with recruitment too. Those people serve as ambassadors for recruiting future students."

The findings indicate that focusing on retention in higher education creates value in financial profitability for higher education institutions which confirms the literature. Nieuwoudt and Pedler (2021) suggested that increasing retention and thus graduation positively affect the institution's financial stability and reputation. Financial profitability from focusing on retention occurs in multiple ways. Participants described that increasing WOM and reducing the number of students who leave were two reasons why focusing on retention is important to financial growth. Participant A3 discusses students leaving the institution when dissatisfied, which is linked to the conceptual framework. Participant A1 discussed satisfied current students would share their experience with new incoming students. In a recent study, Sugama and Sukaatmadja (2020) concluded that increased customer satisfaction leads to customers recommending services. Therefore, focusing on retention is a financial benefit to the institution, as supported by the conceptual framework and recent studies.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings from this study can provide higher education institution leaders with strategies to increase student retention. Retention rates in for-profit online education

institutions were 20% lower than in nonprofit, campus-based, or public higher education institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). There is a financial benefit in investing marketing resources to increase student retention. Attracting a new customer is more expensive than retaining a current customer (Guilbault, 2018; Sleiman et al., 2021). Marketing activities are essential to attract, engage and retain customers; however, participants identified that higher education institutions invest more in marketing to attract new students versus marketing to retain existing students. Pardiyono et al. (2022) explained that the success or failure of an organization in achieving its goals depends on the marketing strategy applied.

Marketing leaders seeking strategies to increase student retention can apply the findings from this study to their organizations. For example, marketing leaders should develop personalized, customized student experiences targeted to their needs based on their information about the student. Marketing leaders should be aware that strategies to engage a student online are different than when the program is face-to-face and requires targeted campaigns to engage students learning at a distance. In an online environment, the business must have intentional strategies to engage customers than in a face-to-face environment where engagement occurs organically. Finally, marketing leaders should understand the financial value of retaining a student and determine the appropriate investment for retention marketing activities.

The findings of this study contribute to the academic body of knowledge on student retention. There is substantial research on student retention in higher education. However, studies on student retention typically collect data from academic staff and

students. The findings of this study are unique because data were collected from marketing leaders and artifacts. The study examined for-profit higher education as a business and students as a customer and focused on the online student experience.

Implications for Social Change

Online higher education in the United States has provided accessible education to individuals who may not have had access to traditional educational paths. Hodgman (2018) described for-profit institutions as a growing market and desirable because of the curriculum, flexibility, and diverse degree options for nontraditional students. In addition, this education model has provided working adults with families who may have had several-year gaps from their last formal education experience the opportunity to achieve their personal and professional goals. Online for-profit higher education has the highest volume of enrollments in the United States from educational institutions in other categories; however, it reports the lowest retention numbers.

This study may provide strategies to business leaders in for-profit online higher education to improve student retention. When for-profit higher education leaders improve retention rates, they may improve their profitability and sustainability to continue to provide educational opportunities. These outcomes could potentially improve students' lives who graduate, and graduates may have increased career opportunities to positively improve personal wealth, development, dignity, and ability to contribute to their communities and the economy.

Recommendations for Action

Higher education marketing leaders can benefit from the study's results by examining strategies to improve student and business outcomes and the factors that can enable those strategies. Many student retention studies are intended for academic leaders in higher education; however, this study focused on aiding marketing leaders in implementing strategies and aligning their organizations to improve student and business outcomes. The main recommendations that resulted from this study include (a) capturing student needs and developing personalized, customized experiences; (b) using strategies designed to engage the online customer; (c) aligning the company structure and resources to support a student-customer in an end-to-end experience and; (d) measure and understand the impact and value of student retention to business profits and revenue.

I will share this study's results in social media groups for higher education. Also, in higher education, business leaders are interested in improving customer experience, retention, and marketing strategies. Finally, I will share the study's results with marketing, service, or digital marketing leaders. I will be open to invitations to discuss the research topic at seminars, conferences, and events. I also plan to publish articles related to marketing, customer experience, and student experience in higher education.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore marketing strategies to increase student retention in for profit online higher education. Four themes emerged from the data collection and analysis: (a) marketing strategies to increase student retention, (b) online experience, (c) key challenges, and (d) retention value. The

study had one limitation: the participants could be biased in their responses, or they may not be forthcoming in providing all details in their responses because of the competitive nature of the for-profit higher education industry. I experienced this limitation in the recruitment process as I received a few responses from individuals concerned about sharing competitive information, their non-compete contracts with their organizations, and overall concern for sharing strategies that could put their organization at risk. However, snowball sampling was the most effective approach in recruiting participants as a referral helped establish trust.

There are five recommendations for future research. First, there is an opportunity to focus research at higher levels of the organization, such as to understand the infrastructure decisions better. Next, I recommend that future researchers consider exploring strategies to increase retention in higher education institutions that have high retention to understand how to use these strategies in for-profit online higher education to increase student retention. I would also recommend future researchers expand the participant criteria to other non-academic business area's that impact student retention through direct outreach, such as frontline customer teams. Expanding participant criteria would provide deeper insights into the constructs of the study that focus on complaint management and online customer service support that was not present in the discussions with marketing leaders. Finally, I recommend future researchers examine the relationship between marketing and academics and explore the challenges, risks, and benefits of creating an end-to-end customer experience.

Reflections

The DBA doctoral study program was an experience in which I evolved personally, professionally, and as a researcher. As a business and marketing professional, at the beginning of the program, as I considered my dissertation topic, I started with bias based on my experience. However, throughout the program, I evolved to approach my research question and business problem as a researcher. It became essential to uphold the research process's integrity and take pride in the study's results. The program equipped me with the tools and research practice to examine the research question from an objective perspective.

Additionally, the program curriculum has helped me improve my critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. I find that I now examine the information from other outlets more critically. Furthermore, throughout the participant recruitment process, I gained an appreciation for the role of researchers from two main perspectives. The first is that I now have a deep appreciation for how the work of researchers helps society evolve. Second, I have a newfound appreciation and understanding for the challenges researchers face in gaining research participants to move their studies forward. As a result, I have committed myself to participate in studies when asked where I am eligible and to use my platforms to promote the value of research participation throughout my career beyond this dissertation.

I was fortunate to have a chair that was responsive and attentive. I am grateful that the program's flexibility allowed me to achieve my goals as a mother and working professional. I am grateful that the companies where I worked understood how to foster a

remote work culture and the importance of work-life balance so I can succeed in this endeavor. I am excited about becoming a thought leader in marketing, higher education, and customer experience. I am excited about what is next following this milestone.

Conclusion

Competition continues to increase rapidly in the higher education sector. As a result, higher education leaders must consider ways to gain competitive advantage in the industry for growth and sustainability. While online for-profit higher education institutions have established marketing practices to recruit new students, there is an opportunity to focus on revenue from student retention.

Recent studies indicate that companies in the service industry, including retail, hospitality, and banking, apply relationship marketing concepts to increase customer retention. Studies also indicate that while the higher education industry has adopted marketing practices to recruit students, there is still an opportunity to become a category leader by adopting marketing strategies to increase student retention. The challenges institutions face to succeed with retention marketing strategies include recognizing higher education as part of the service industry and viewing the student as a customer of that service. Latif et al. (2019) argued that the education sector is considered part of the service industry. Pardiyono et al. (2022) posited that higher education should satisfy customers like any other business and use marketing principles to attract and retain students to stay competitive.

The results of this study should provide marketing leaders with strategies to increase student retention, understand the value of focusing on student retention, and

identify challenges in achieving student retention goals. The financial benefits include increasing revenue from students who stay enrolled, positive WOM, and brand reputation influencing new students to enroll at the institution. The findings from the study indicate that for-profit online higher education institutions must develop an internal marketing infrastructure that includes new and existing students to achieve long-term sustainable impact. As competition in higher education increases and consumer expectations evolves in the digital age, student retention will continue to become a critical factor in maintaining financial stability.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The following guide outlines the interview protocol the researcher will adhere to for each individual interview for this doctoral study.

Establishing Interview: The researcher will invite the participant to volunteer for the research study on the LinkedIn social media platform, and the participant will contact the researcher using the listed contact information if they are interested in participating. The researcher will provide a consent form via email to the participant to review and respond with their consent. The researcher and participant will determine a mutually agreed upon time to meet. The researcher will send an online meeting invitation to the participant for that time.

Pre-interview:

Welcome and Thank you: I will welcome the participant and thank them for their time and participation.

Introductions: I will introduce myself and restate that I am doctoral student conducting research on a topic. I will ask the participant to introduce themselves.

Restate items in Consent form: I will provide a brief overview of the consent form, restating the confidentiality section. I will explain my current interview location with the participant explaining that I am alone in a private room and our conversation will not be overheard. I will provide a brief view of the room with the online video camera. I will then ask if the participant is ready to proceed with the questions.

Interview:

Research questions:

- I will ask the interview questions in order and wait for a response for each. I will ask a probing question is necessary.

- I will manage time with the participant if necessary to complete the interview on time.

Interview Ends:

- Once the interview questions are complete, I will thank the participant for their participation.

- I will remind the participant that I will send a copy of the transcripts to them by email in the next 1-2 weeks to review and provide feedback for accuracy.

Post Interview:

- I will email the $20 gift as stated in the consent form to the participant once all the data has been confirmed, the data collection is complete, and the findings have been documented.

- I will send a copy of the interview summary to the participant and ask for a response and feedback within 1 week. I will inform the participant that if I don't receive a response the information will not be used and will be discarded. I will seek additional participants for data collection.