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Effective Strategies Leaders Use to Enhance the Retention of Frontline Workers in the Fast-Food Industry

Kimberly Jean Nzuwah
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Kimberly Nzuwah

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Review Committee
Dr. Michael Campo, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Warren Lesser, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

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Abstract

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MS, University of Maryland Global Campus, 2013

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Leaders in the fast-food industry face challenges with frontline employee retention, which impacts organizational profitability and performance. Fast-food leaders are concerned about retaining frontline employees to sustain a competitive advantage. Grounded in the conservation of resources theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers. The participants were six fast-food managers in an eastern U.S. state who successfully increased frontline employee retention. Data were analyzed using Yin’s five-step data analysis process. Four themes emerged: (a) effective recruiting and onboarding strategies, (b) competitive direct and indirect compensation, (c) leadership characteristics, and (d) supportive and fun workplace culture. A key recommendation for fast-food leaders is to develop a fun workplace culture by encouraging frontline employees to participate in gamification and social activities. The implications for positive social change include the potential for fast food leaders to improve the quality of life and dignity of local citizens.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my family. I dedicate this study to my parents, who encouraged me to always improve myself and who set the expectation early in my life to pursue higher education. They are the best parents I could ever ask for! I dedicate this study to my brother, Ben, and my sister-in-law, Tanya, who reminded me of my ability to finish what I started. I dedicate this study to my daughter, Caitlin. My greatest hope is that you remember that you can do anything you put your mind to – and that you can nurture your family, excel in your career, develop meaningful friendships, and still prioritize your own passions and dreams. I dedicate this study to my husband, Nate, who stayed up late every night as I toiled away to keep me company. You drove me from restaurant to restaurant to find participants because you knew I was nervous to do it alone. I could not have even begun this journey without your love, support, and commitment to our family.

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Thank you, God, for the strength, direction, and success. I thank my chair, Dr. Campo, and second chair, Dr. Lesser. I am grateful for all professors, teachers, and mentors who have taught me throughout my academic journey and planted a lifelong desire to learn, discover, and push my limits. I also thank my friends, especially those who played Wingspan with me and committed to family dinners once a week, which kept my family sane.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Leaders of fast-food service restaurants face challenges with employee retention, and employee turnover impacts organizational profitability and performance. Gaps in leadership management skills, organizational resources, employee burnout, and the nature of work itself in the fast-food industry could contribute to turnover (Bufkin et al., 2022; Thiara, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the effective strategies that some leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers.

Background of the Problem

Employee turnover remains a challenge in the food service industry. Turnover rates in the food service industry have steadily increased in the last 5 years from 72% to 79%, peaking at 130% during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). By the end of 2021, employee turnover in the food service industry decreased to 86.3% but remained higher than in other U.S. industries (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). High employee turnover negatively impacts organizations' profitability. Employee turnover can cost restaurants up to half to 2 times the exiting worker's annual salary in recruiting, hiring, and training replacements and lost knowledge (Gallup, 2022). With the food service industry experiencing supply chain disruptions and rising food, labor, and occupancy costs, over half of food service operators anticipate recruiting and retaining employees to remain a top priority (National Restaurant Association, 2022a). Leaders should use strategies to maximize employee retention and thus avoid the adverse, organizational impacts resulting from turnover.

Multiple factors contribute to employee turnover. One contributing factor to turnover is employee stress and burnout in a high-demand industry coupled with low-support work environments (Kurniawaty et al., 2019; Park & Min, 2020). Compared to mid- and high-level employees, frontline workers are more likely to experience the negative effects of work-related stress, and over a third of frontline workers have reported burnout (American Psychological Association, 2021). Employees experiencing high degrees of psychological stress are more likely to leave the fast-food industry (Bufkin et al., 2022). Seventy-five percent of respondents of a National Restaurant Association (2022a) survey indicated that food service leaders planned to devote more resources to employee retention. Understanding how to reduce employee stress and build a healthier work environment in the food service industry can be a useful strategy to enhance employee retention.

Problem and Purpose

The general business problem was that employee turnover can negatively impact organizational profitability. The specific business problem was that some leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions lack effective strategies to enhance the retention of frontline workers. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the effective strategies that some leaders of U.S. fast food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers.

Population and Sampling

The targeted population of this study were fast-food managers in the capital region of Maryland who had successfully used retention strategies to reduce the turnover of hourly frontline workers. To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria: (a) successfully used retention strategies to reduce the turnover of hourly frontline workers, (b) improved frontline employee retention in the last year, and (c) at least 1 year of managerial experience. I selected potential participants by searching the internet, engaging local counties' chambers of commerce, and surveying local fast-food establishments. After participant recruitment and selection, I collected multiple data sources for analysis by conducting semistructured interviews with each participant, examining relevant publicly available data, and soliciting organizational documents related to the central research question.

Many researchers have used purposive sampling to identify participants. Purposive sampling is frequently applied in conceptually driven qualitative studies to select participants based on variables or qualities that affect the contribution to the research question (Farrugia, 2019). By using a purposive sampling method, the researcher can select the most information-rich and relevant sources to gain insight and in-depth understanding to answer a research question (Staller, 2021). I purposively sampled six fast-food leaders in the capital region of Maryland who met eligibility criteria to ensure suitable research participants for this study. The use of purposive sampling aligned with the research methodology and research purpose, thus contributing to the study's rigor.

Researchers must also ensure sample sizes are large enough to reach data saturation. To further improve the rigor of data analysis, qualitative researchers aim for thematic saturation, which can be achieved through item saliency or the obtention of more valuable information per participant (Weller et al., 2018). Data saturation is achieved when additional interviews do not yield new information or insights (Knechel, 2019). I collected data from the participants through asking well-designed interview questions and skillful follow-up questions until data saturation was reached. I achieved data saturation when I was unable to identify new themes through coding the participants’ responses.

Nature of the Study

Researchers tend to consider several factors when selecting a methodology for a study. There are three kinds of research methodologies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers use the qualitative methodology to understand “how” or “why” a phenomenon occurs by gathering information to understand the meaning and experiences of participants’ interpretations of the phenomenon (Denzin & Ryan, 2007). Because the purpose of the current study was to identify and explore successful strategies leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions had used to enhance the retention of hourly workers through open-ended questions in semistructured interviews with direct observations, the qualitative method was most appropriate. In contrast, researchers use the quantitative methodology to examine variables, characteristics, or relationships (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). The mixed-methods approach is appropriate when aspects of qualitative and quantitative research or analysis are combined to provide a wider understanding of the subject phenomenon to overcome the limitations of each individual approach (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). The objective of this study was not to test a hypothesis or examine the statistical differences between groups; therefore, neither quantitative nor mixed-methods approaches would have been appropriate for this study.

Researchers select the research design that best addresses the research question. The qualitative methodology includes several research designs, such as phenomenology, narrative, and case study (Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers employ a phenomenological design to explore the essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In contrast, researchers use a narrative design to tell personal life stories related to an event (George & Selimos, 2018). A phenomenological design was not appropriate for this study because the purpose was not to understand the personal meaning of the participants' lived experiences or was a narrative design holistic enough to address retention strategies. On the other hand, researchers use a case study design to explore a particular phenomenon through the detailed accounts of one or more cases (Yin, 2018). The case study design was most suitable for the current study because the purpose was to identify the successful strategies U.S. fast-food leaders use to enhance the retention of hourly employees in multiple organizations.

Research Question

What strategies do some leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies do you use to enhance the retention of frontline workers?
2. What resources do you use to enhance employee retention?

3. What motivational strategies do you use to enhance the retention of frontline employees?
4. How, if at all, have you helped employees cope with the stresses of a frontline position?
5. What barriers, if at all, do you encounter in implementing strategies to enhance the retention of frontline employees?
6. What processes or systems do you use to overcome barriers to employee retention?
7. What leadership style do you use to enhance the retention of frontline employees?
8. What additional information would you like to share regarding strategies that enhance the retention of frontline employees?

Conceptual Framework

Steven Hobfoll (1989) developed the conservation of resources (COR) theory to understand the stress process on human behavior particularly because of the loss and gain of resources, defined as things the person centrally values. Hobfoll (2001) identified four types of resources individuals strive to obtain and protect: objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies. Hobfoll (1989) suggested that employees would leave an organization to in effort to offset resource loss. The motivational effects of COR theory indicate that resource loss is primary, meaning loss leads to stronger reactions than gain, yet when loss is high, resource gain is paradoxically even more important and increases in value (Hobfoll, 2018). Another fundamental aspect of COR theory is that to prevent resource loss, individuals must invest in resources as more resourceful individuals can withstand stress caused by loss (Hobfoll et al., 2015). The theory is consistent with the issue of voluntary turnover of hourly workers in U.S. foodservice institutions because employees may be reluctant to remain in a position that threatens, depletes, or fails to offset the loss of resources. Leaders who understand why employees voluntarily leave their organization and who encourage employee resource investment may be better equipped to retain talent, which could increase the overall profitability of the organization.

Operational Definitions

Employee engagement: The active performance of employees demonstrating commitment beyond simply arriving at work and being immersed in the job (Kim & Gatling, 2017).

Employee retention: The ability of an organization to maintain a culture and environment that encourages an employee to stay (Degbey et al., 2021).

Frontline workers: Full- or part-time hourly employees of the food service industry that provide face-to-face interaction with customers, may prepare food and beverages, and may take payment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Job burnout: The result of prolonged emotional or interpersonal job stressors on an employee, resulting in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, or diminished personal accomplishment (Mahusuweerachai, 2022).

Job satisfaction: The positive emotional state, indicative of fulfilled needs, goals, and values, that results from an employee's favorable appraisal of employment (Valk & Yousif, 2023).

Voluntary turnover: The actual termination of a work employment relationship initiated at will by the employee (Liborius & Kiewitz, 2022).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

I made three assumptions related to this study. Assumptions are preconceived beliefs of the researcher (Yang et al., 2018). One assumption was that a qualitative research approach was adequate and suitable to address the topic of employee retention of hourly workers. I also assumed that the interview questions were sufficient to answer the research question. My final assumption was that participants provided truthful answers.

Limitations

I identified two limitations for this study. According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2018), limitations are potential weaknesses outside the control of the researcher and may include theory assumptions, outcome interpretations, and subsequent, corresponding conclusions. Researchers are the principal tool for data collection and influence the interpretation of collected data (Yin, 2018). A limitation of this study was that participants may not have fully divulged information despite my best efforts to ensure confidentiality and make them comfortable. Another limitation was the limited resources available to enable a broader geographical scope of the study.

Delimitations

I intentionally restricted the scope of my study by setting delimitations. Delimitations are intentional boundaries the researcher sets to ensure study objectives are achievable (Theofandis & Fountouki, 2018). I delimited the geographical location of the study to facilitate reaching valid and reliable conclusions for a targeted region of the United States by interviewing fast-food leaders in the capital region of Maryland. To garner information from experienced fast-food leaders, I excluded fast-food leaders with less than 1 year of experience to determine what strategies were effective at enhancing the retention of hourly workers. Because of the small number of participants in a case study, I interviewed fast-food managers and not frontline employees to facilitate reaching data saturation.

Significance of the Study

Contribution to Business Practice

The findings of this qualitative multiple case study can contribute to business practice by helping U.S. fast-food leaders develop and implement strategies to enhance the retention of hourly frontline workers. Employee turnover is an ongoing phenomenon affecting the fast-food industry that impacts organizations' profitability because of the subsequent direct costs, such as recruitment, selecting and training of replacements, and indirect costs, which include work disruption and productivity loss (Lyons & Bandura, 2020). The high costs of employee turnover reduce the availability of funds available to an organization to maintain existing talent, decreasing the firm's ability to achieve competitive advantage in a business environment (Sandhya & Sulphey, 2020).

Implications for Social Change

This study's implications for positive social change may include economic and emotional benefits to employees. Fast-food institutions become more sustainable because of decreased employee turnover due to its impact on profitability (Coetzer et al., 2019). By successfully retaining hourly employees, companies' profit margins, workforce capabilities, and employee job satisfaction could increase. As a result, the employer and employees can positively affect beneficial social change in their communities by stimulating local economic growth. At a community level, unemployment rates could decrease as a result of the current study, which could lead to reduced poverty, decreased crime, and increased financial resources contributed back into surrounding areas. Additionally, employees who experience increased job satisfaction may also experience reduced stress in the workplace. Life satisfaction is greatly predicted by quality of work life (Alrawadieh et al., 2019). With increased life satisfaction, employees may engage with others at home and in their communities in positive ways.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

To understand the context behind the phenomenon of employee retention, I conducted a critical analysis of current and historical studies on employee turnover, employee retention, and job satisfaction in the context of the fast-food industry. I used peer-reviewed articles as the foundation of my critical literature review. The Walden University Library and Google Scholar were primarily used to locate journal articles, but the Business Source Complete, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect databases were also searched. The following key words were used to source appropriate material for the literature review: *employee retention*, *employee turnover*, *job satisfaction, fast food, restaurant industry, leadership, employee burnout, emotional exhaustion, organizational commitment, supportive work environment,* and *conservation of resources theory*. To ensure critical analysis of the professional and academic literature, I examined 135 sources, of which 129 were articles and six were books. Of the 135 total sources, 115 were published within the mandatory 5-year publication date requirement (i.e., 2019–2023), representing 88% of the total sources (see Table 1) and 114 sources, or 87% of the total sources, were published in peer-reviewed journals, which were confirmed on *Ulrich's Web Global Serials Directory*. References published prior to 2019, such as seminal works, and non-peer-reviewed sources, such as government sources, were included to provide depth and context to the studied phenomenon.

Table 1

Summary of Sources for Literature Review

Source	No. of sources published after 2019	No. of sources published before 2019	Total
Peer-reviewed journal articles	101	13	114
Non-peer-reviewed sources	14	3	17
Total	115	16	131

The purpose of this literature review was to offer readers knowledge of the factors and influences that contribute to employee turnover in the U.S. fast-food industry. Voluntary turnover of hourly food service workers can decrease organizational profitability, human capital, and productivity while increasing operating expenses (Kumar, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Food service industry employee turnover was 86% in

2021, exceeding turnover rates in other industries within the United States, with each replaced employee costing the average restaurant 150% to 200% of the terminated employee's annual salary (Gallup, 2022; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). A robust review of the current literature provided readers with a solid foundation to understand the opportunities to enhance retention of frontline workers in the U.S. fast-food industry.

The organization of this literature review aligned with themes related to the strategies leaders use to retain employees, which aligned with the overarching research question. First, I examine the literature on the state of the U.S. fast-food industry, which the coronavirus pandemic significantly impacted, and the potential causes of high turnover. The second part of the review is focused on theories that could explain the relationship between stress in organizational settings, specifically the COR theory. In the third part of the review, I discuss aspects of resource loss and gain through themes, such as job insecurity, work-life conflict, compensation, work environment, and the role of leadership. Based on this review, fast-food leaders could determine which strategies to incorporate to retain their hourly employees.

Retention Challenges in the Restaurant and Fast-Food Industry

The restaurant industry is one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the United States. At the beginning of 2023, over 12 million Americans were employed in the restaurant industry, almost 20% more than a decade prior (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). With 63% of adults reporting working experience in the restaurant industry, the field is an impactful training ground for the country's labor force (National Restaurant Association, 2022a). However, the industry has historically struggled with high turnover rates due to low salaries, minimum benefits, and unsafe working conditions (Thiara, 2023). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the working conditions of frontline employees, leading to increased struggles with retention.

Frontline workers in the restaurant industry experienced increased stress through the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic disproportionately affected the hospitality industry, which accounted for 2 out of 3 jobs lost in the United States, an industry loss of more than 8 million employees and $280 billion in sales in the first year of the pandemic alone (National Restaurant Association, 2022a; U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2022). The essential frontline workers who continued to work experienced lasting feelings of worry, anxiety, and uncertainty related to imposed furloughs, job insecurity, and disease exposure (Chen & Chen, 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2021). The essential frontline employees were also more likely to suffer psychological distress and drug and alcohol use than their furloughed or unemployed counterparts (Bufquin et al., 2021). Pandemic-related stress will continue to some degree in this industry as COVID-19 will likely remain endemic (Are et al., 2023). Fast-food leaders must find ways to enhance employee mental and physical wellness, which can positively impact the retention of frontline employees who have worked through pandemic stressors.

Even though the restaurant industry has reopened and begun recovery with COVID-19 vaccination rollouts, the industry continues to struggle because of the labor shortage. The pandemic exacerbated industry stressors and increased employee awareness of how much employers could benefit at employees’ expense (Thiara, 2023). Stressors include work-family conflict and challenging work conditions related to workload and irregular hours and are linked to increased industry turnover (Abdou et al., 2022; Abubakar et al., 2022). Other former employees refused reentry into the industry because of a desire for a new career path that offered flexible scheduling and better compensation (Chen & Rui, 2022). How the fast-food leaders responded to the pandemic elicited negative feelings in the employees, consequently motivating employees to leave the industry (Popa et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2021). With former talent leaving the restaurant and fast-food industries, employers must increase their attractiveness to potential applicants while retaining the talent they already have.

The restaurant industry includes several food service styles: quick service, full service, and fast casual. The service styles predominantly vary in degree of service, menu options, and price (Mendocilla et al., 2021). Quick service restaurants are characterized by convenient and fast counter service, limited menu selection, and low prices. Many quick service restaurants are franchise chains offering consistent service quality and standards (Mendocilla et al., 2021). The fast-food industry is comprised of quick service restaurants and fast casual restaurants.

Restaurant industry leaders, specifically those in the fast-food industry, must help employees navigate industry stressors to retain talent successfully. Despite loosened COVID restrictions, fast-food employees continued to have the highest quit rate compared to other industries at 5.6% in 2022 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Of the employees who resigned, only 54% worked 90 days before quitting (Beckett, 2023). Employee turnover can cost restaurants up to half to 2 times the exiting worker's annual salary in recruiting, hiring, and training replacements and lost knowledge (Gallup, 2022).

Many fast-food establishments subsequently suffer a high percentage of failure within the first 5 years because of ineffective retention strategies (Yacoub & Harb, 2023). Employees tend to leave the fast-food industry for employment that offers increased flexibility, stability, and pay (Bhattarai & Penman, 2023). Understanding the reasons employees voluntarily leave the fast-food work will help restaurant leaders learn how to retain talent and potentially augment establishment profitability.

In the post pandemic world, the fast-food industry remains an area of high consumer demand yet a place of high stress for employees. Fast-food industry leaders are managing a diminished workforce that must balance the general stresses of frontline work (Popa et al., 2023; Thiara, 2023). In the fast-food industry, frontline employees significantly impact restaurant profitability and long-term success (Kumar, 2022; Liu et al., 2022). Leaders must understand how frontline employees respond to the stressful environment to reduce turnover and retain talent, and cognizance of relevant stress theory can enhance leaders' comprehension of this situation.

COR Theory

The COR theory provides a framework for understanding employees' decisions under stress. Hobfoll (1989) developed the COR theory to understand the circumstances that cause stress and the subsequent consequences of stress. The fundamental tenet of COR theory is that people are motivated to acquire, retain, safeguard, and cultivate the objects and concepts they value, which are called *resources* (Hobfoll, 1989, 1990). The value of resources differs among individuals and varies between individuals based on personal experiences, preferences, and situations (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Individuals may value resources directly for what they are, or they may value resources indirectly as a means to achieve goals, reduce demands, and spur personal growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Psychological stress arises when an individual perceives the threat of resource loss, incurs resource loss, or fails to gain anticipated resources.

Hobfoll (1989, 1990) grouped resources into four categories or types: objects, conditions, personal characteristics, or energies. Objects are material goods, such as cars, jewelry, or houses, while conditions are social circumstances, such as marriage or job stability, that can lead to procuring other resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Personal characteristics, which include self-esteem and optimism, are the skills or attributes that can help individuals cope with stressful environments, achieve goals, or procure other resources, and energies are the resources, such as money and knowledge, that individuals use to obtain other resources (Hobfoll, 1989). The value of each resource can be explained by either its necessity for survival or the protection of an individual's being and status (Holmgreen et al., 2017). Because protecting an individual's being and status is reinforced through cultural and personal experiences, the degree of worth can vary over time, although most resources are universally valued.

In the COR theory, Hobfoll (1989) suggested that there are four distinct ways resources are impacted that may lead to specific, predictable behaviors within individuals: loss, replacement, reappraisal, or investment. Individuals react to resource impacts by exhibiting stress, coping, and motivation behaviors (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll (1990) stated that resource impacts are either passive, defined as an impact that happens to an individual, or active, defined as an impact the individual makes. Resource loss is a passive impact, while resource replacement is active. According to the COR theory, individuals are intrinsically motivated to recover and protect the valued resource to mitigate the stress of resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals naturally behave in ways that offset and minimize resource loss, which is described in the basic principles of the COR theory.

Basic Principles

The COR theory consists of four basic principles that explain the impacts on resources in greater detail. The first principle is *primacy of loss*, which suggests the impact of resource loss is greater than that of resource gain (Hobfoll 1989, 1990). The disproportionate effect of resource loss is a combination of a greater magnitude of impact, speed of impact, and length of time the impact is felt (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The environmental factors and events that deplete resources have longer term stress implications for an individual than any factor that may increase resources (Hobfoll 1989, 1990).

The second principle of the COR theory is *resource investment*. Under this principle, people must invest in resources to prevent resource loss, recover from lost resources, or acquire new resources (Hobfoll 1989, 1990). An example of resource investment is when people protect against health resource loss by eating a balanced diet to promote healthy immune function. People will recover lost health resources by spending resources, such as paid time off from work, to see a doctor (Hobfoll, 1990). Finally, people acquire new health resources by spending money resources on exercise to enhance their health outcomes.

The third principle of the COR theory is the *gain paradox*. Hobfoll et al. (2018) described the gain paradox as when an individual is in a situation of resource loss, and any resource gain is perceived as more valuable and thus more essential. Halbesleben et al. (2014) suggested that employment-related resource gains are even more meaningful after a period of resource loss, such as gaining employment after a long period of unemployment. Resource gains may not significantly impact individuals outside of a resource loss cycle but are salient for individuals who experience sustained resource loss.

The final principle of the COR theory is *desperation*. In the COR theory, Hobfoll (1989) wrote that when people are depleted of resources, they become defensive and aggressive in self-preservation. Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggested that individuals may withdraw or behave irrationally during resource exhaustion. Individuals act defensively to preserve themselves and, in so doing, allow the stressor to pass without further resource depletion. Just as the four basic principles of the COR theory are fundamental to the understanding of the stress process in individuals, the COR theory corollaries are more complex predictions of stress reactions.

Corollaries

The COR theory includes three corollaries. Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggested corollaries are the foundation of the complex strategies individuals use to counteract the stress produced at individual or organizational levels. Hobfoll (1989) noted that the corollaries explain and predict behaviors individuals will take when confronted with stressful conditions. The COR theory corollaries demonstrate the complexity of the relationships between an individual's starting pool of resources and the ability to accumulate resources.

The first corollary of COR theory is that individuals with more resources are less susceptible to resource loss and more capable of resource gain (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Consistent with the principle of resource investment, such individuals have grown their resources to offset the stress of resource loss better, and such individuals are better equipped to protect and gain resources during periods of stress (Hobfoll, 2018). Conversely, individuals with fewer resources are more vulnerable to resource loss and less capable of gaining resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Hobfoll and Shirom (2000) suggested that individuals with large resource reserves will seek resource gain even at the expense of resource risk. However, individuals who lack resources follow the desperation principle and act defensively, and to minimize further resource loss, will not take opportunities for resource gain (Hobfoll et al., 2018). To illustrate the first corollary, an employee who benefits from the resource of managerial support may be more vocal about process improvements, while an employee without the resource of managerial support may be less inclined to do so, thus taking a low-risk, defensive posture and in so doing, may continue performing the same processes in the same way.

The COR theory's second and third corollaries address the downstream impacts on an individual after a resource change. Corollary 2 suggests that resource loss cycles have a spiraling and unfolding nature (Hobfoll et al., 2018). To cope with a stressor, an individual must use invested resources. If there is resource insufficiency, the demand upon the individual may push the person over the edge, resulting in further loss

(Holmgreen et al., 2017). As stress occurs with each iteration of resource loss, the individual has fewer resources to offset the losses leading to increased impact and momentum with each loss occurrence.

The final corollary of the COR theory suggests resource gain cycles also have spiraling natures, where resource gain begets future gains (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). Such cycles are less impactful and take more time to develop than resource loss cycles because of the principle of the primacy of loss (Hobfoll et al., 2018). However, Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggested that the resource gain paradox can be applied to understanding resource gain cycles. Resource gain cycles gain saliency in high resource loss settings, leading to high payoffs.

Environmental impact influence resource depletion, creation, and maintenance. Hobfoll (2018) suggested that resources are neither static nor isolated and travel in caravans because resources result from nurture and adaptation to common environmental conditions. For instance, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism are highly correlated in research (Hobfoll et al., 2015). These correlated resources are linked together through a resource caravan passageway, defined as how social and environmental conditions shape an individual’s ability to create or sustain resources (Hobfoll et al., 2015). An example of a resource caravan is the positive association between an individual’s external social support and internal self-efficacy. Organizational leaders can help employees develop and maintain their resource caravans by generating effective resource caravan passageways.

While the COR theory was first developed as a stress theory, recent literature has applied the theory as a combination of stress and motivation. Breaugh (2020) suggested motivation can only be understood by understanding how individuals respond to stress. Indeed, the COR theory goes beyond a simple coping model whereby an individual reactively seeks to reduce stress (Hobfoll, 1989). The COR theory presents a secondary, proactive coping process in which individuals invest in resources for risk minimization and resource maximization in the future (Hobfoll, 2018). Bon and Shire (2022) suggested the COR theory is a hedonic motivational theory as it contains elements of self-interest in its basic tenet of protection, conservation, and acquisition of resources. Individuals strive to achieve resource surpluses to protect themselves from future stresses related to resource loss, which leads to a state of eustress or psychological well-being (Hobfoll 1989). Individuals also strive to acquire a buffer of resources to avoid falling into resource loss spirals, which can be triggered by any initial resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). As a motivation theory, the COR theory can be used to explain an individual's behavior even in the absence of imminent resource loss and stress.

COR Theory and Employee Turnover in the Fast-Food Industry

The COR theory has multiple applications in the organizational context. The COR theory can help explain stress, emotional exhaustion, occupational burnout, and resilience (Bardoel & Drago, 2021; Holmgreen et al., 2017; Zhou & Chen, 2021). Researchers apply the COR theory to understand high stress and adverse circumstances, including war, natural disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bardoel & Drago, 2021). Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggested that stressful conditions were rarely the result of a single event but instead a culmination of events. In hospitality literature, researchers have widely applied the COR theory to explain the antecedents and outcomes of burnout and work disengagement (Alola et al., 2019). From a motivation perspective, the COR theory has also been applied to increase employee innovative work behavior and resilience via personal resources such as psychological capital (Farrukh et al., 2022; Zhou & Chen, 2021). Researchers can use the COR theory to understand employee behavior in the stressful context of the current fast-food industry.

The COR theory, in summation, presents stress and an individual's stress reaction as relative to the individual's perception and amount of resources at a moment in time. Extending beyond stress predictions to explore motivation, organizational leaders can consider generating resource caravans to produce other resources for topics such as employee retention. The COR theory provides a solid conceptual framework for explaining the relationship between the stressful environment of the fast-food industry because the multiple challenges decrease, rather than increase, an individual's resource acquisition capacity, resulting in burnout, stress, and turnover intention (Chong et al., 2023). Yet, organizational leaders can aim to buffer employees by developing contextual resources, such as psychological empowerment, to offset the impact of the challenges (Li et al., 2021). Given the tumultuousness of the fast-food industry, leaders are responsible for promoting environments that can decrease incidences of stress, increase motivation, and buffer resources.

Alternative Theories

Job satisfaction and motivation theories are also relevant for understanding employees' voluntary turnover. Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory of work motivation is a similar motivation theory that can be applied to reduce the issue of high employee turnover. Demerouti's (2001) job demands-resources theory (JD-R) (2001) integrates stress and motivational perspectives to understand employee well-being and performance. Investigating similar theories can provide fast-food leaders with greater insight into practical measures that could increase employee retention.

Two-Factory Theory of Work Motivation

Herzberg et al. (1959) developed the two-factor motivation-hygiene theory, which differentiated motivation and hygiene factors to explain employee job satisfaction. The factors that increase job satisfaction are unique from those that increase job dissatisfaction. Herzberg et al. suggested job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposites but separate and unipolar traits. Herzberg et al. suggested that individuals could simultaneously be satisfied and dissatisfied because motivation and hygiene factors work separately. Motivation and hygiene factors equally impact creating an organizational environment that fosters employee motivation.

Motivation factors relate to elements that cause an individual to achieve job-related goals. Such intrinsic factors lead to increased motivation and job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). Motivation factors include the work itself, recognition, growth, responsibility, job advancement, and achievement (Herzberg et al., 1959). In the absence of motivation factors, employees may not be satisfied, which might reduce productivity in the workplace.

Hygiene factors are extrinsic and cause employees to feel happiness at work. Hygiene factors include work relationships, work conditions, salary, benefits, and policies. Hygiene factors do not increase motivation for work, although their absence increases job dissatisfaction (Alrawahi et al., 2020). Herzberg et al. (1959) suggested that employees respond by reducing productivity when hygiene factors are inadequate. When employees perceive hygiene factors to be adequate, they are not dissatisfied.

Whereas Herzberg’s two-factor theory of work motivation focuses on motivation factors, the COR theory extends beyond motivation to understand the impact of environmental stressors and their influence on employee behavior. Herzberg et al. (1959) suggested that when motivators are increased, job satisfaction also increases, thereby increasing employee retention. The COR theory suggests individuals will instinctively seek resources to fulfill their goals, and resource loss significantly impacts an individual’s perception that goal achievement is threatened (Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, employee retention in a climate as stressful as the fast-food industry could be better understood if leaders could decrease stressors and help employees offset resource losses to enhance motivation.

JD-R Theory

Another theory similar to the COR theory is the JD-R theory. Demerouti et al. (2001) developed the JD-R theory to understand employee burnout and disengagement. Bakker and Demerouti (2007) suggested that through a motivational process, job resources increase work engagement while decreasing employee burnout. Jobs have two components: job demands and job resources. Job demands are the physical, psychological, social, and organizational parts that require an individual's efforts and skills (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Examples can include work pressure and stressful work conditions. Job demands erode an individual's resources, which elicits adverse responses (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). An individual's increased efforts to deal with job demands lead to job strain, exhaustion, and health problems (Li et al., 2022). Job resources are the physical, psychological, social, and organizational parts that enhance work engagement and performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Examples include job autonomy or supervisory support.

There are many parallels between the JD-R theory and the COR theory. The boost hypothesis states that job demands amplify the impact of job resources and suggests that employees who regularly deal with challenging job demands benefit from social job resources to cope (Bakker, 2023). This hypothesis is reminiscent of the first corollary of the COR theory, which suggests individuals with greater pools of resources are less susceptible to resource loss. The JD-R theory also proposes that employees can experience resource gain cycles because they are engaged in their work and subsequently optimize their job through job crafting, enhancing employees' sense of job engagement (Bakker, 2023). However, the JD-R theory focuses only on work characteristics and disregards the inherent traits and resources of staff (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Because personal resources and traits may influence individuals in the workplace, the COR theory is more suitable asthe conceptual framework for this study. The COR theory also uniquely describes the tenet that job resources are more salient in the context of resource loss, which is relevant to stressful encounters, both work and personal, in the fast-food industry.

Resource Loss at Work and Offsetting Resource Loss

Empirical studies suggest resource loss or threats to resource loss in the workplace result in increased stress. Hobfoll et al. (2018) suggested that employees with limited resources or the inability to gain more resources are more likely to experience burnout. Research on causes of resource loss includes job insecurity, surface acting, and work-family conflict, while downstream effects of resource loss in the restaurant industry include emotional exhaustion, burnout, and boreout (Abubakar et al., 2022; Chen & Eyoun, 2021). Fast-food leaders who effectively offset employee resource loss in the workplace may reduce the negative downstream impacts on employee well-being.

Job Insecurity

An employee's perception of job security affects turnover. Economic stressors can impact job security, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions and mandates resulted in accelerated declines in revenues and business closures in the fast-food industry, and subsequent loss of employment hours (McCartney et al., 2022). Chen and Eyoun (2021) found that restaurant frontline employees' fear of COVID-19 was positively related to job insecurity. Frontline employees who perceived their jobs as insecure were less motivated to work and more likely to leave (Chen & Eyoun, 2021). From a COR theory perspective, an employee may perceive job insecurity as a threat to resources, including income, benefits, and self-esteem.

Changing trends can also contribute to an employee's job security concerns. The rise of robotic servers and digital services in the fast-food industry increases focus on work efficiency and cost reduction, which can create uncertainties and threats to employee job security (Qiu et al., 2020). Up to 82% of frontline restaurant positions could be supplemented or replaced by robotics (Baldwin, 2023). The perceived threat to job security can increase job burnout in frontline fast-food employees (Chong et al., 2023). Job insecurity strongly predicts lower job satisfaction, decreased job engagement, and higher turnover intentions (Bairami et al., 2021; Jung et al., 2021). When employees perceive their jobs as insecure, job dissatisfaction and turnover intention increase.

Overcoming Job Insecurity. Fast-food leaders should address employees' concerns about job insecurity, which can enhance morale and retention. In a meta-analytical study on organizational resilience in turbulent environments, Bui et al. (2019) suggested that open communication can positively influence employee morale and well-being. Fast-food managers can facilitate open communication by frequently speaking to employees about job insecurity concerns and encouraging openness to approach with concerns (Altinay et al., 2019). Because job insecurity can erode trust in management, managers may further benefit from training to enhance skills in transferring and decreasing employees' negative emotions through support and active listening (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2022). Organizational practices that address job insecurity and promote job satisfaction will likely result in employee retention (Shoss et al., 2020). Fast-food leaders may offset the stress of job insecurity and satisfy employees by directly acknowledging employee concerns through open communication.

Work-Life Conflict

Work-life conflict is common among employees within the fast-food industry. Work-family conflict tends to stem from long and irregular working hours, seasonality, and family-unfriendly shifts, which hamper an employee's ability to fulfill family obligations (Abdou et al., 2022). Work-life conflict increases fast-food employees' turnover intention and negatively influences well-being (Fotiadis et al., 2019; Haldorai et al., 2019). From a COR theory perspective, time and energy are finite resources in constant conflict between work and family demands. Employees who perceive a threat to time and energy resources at work may experience resource scarcity and an inability to meet family demands, which can increase work-family conflict.

The demographic landscape also impacts work-family conflict in the fast-food industry. Fifty-four percent of the food service employees are female, a high proportion compared to the 48% of female employees employed in the U.S. labor force (National Restaurant Association, 2022b). Women are more vulnerable to the lack of work-family support (Craig & Churchill, 2021), and many women have struggled with childcare and concerns about their children's safety while at work (Jolly et al., 2022). Additionally, 60% of foodservice labor force is under age 35, which is a high proportion relative to the 35% of Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, employees in the U.S. workforce (National Restaurant Association, 2022b). Generation Z employees value flexible work environments that support well-being through work-life balance (Goh & Okumus, 2020). Fast-food leaders who successfully address work-family conflict and promote work-life balance may enhance the retention of frontline employees.

Fast-food leaders can consider several ways to lessen the stress of work-life conflict. Employers should reevaluate and expand benefit programs to include child or eldercare assistance or consider flexible work schedules (Liu-Lastres et al., 2023). Kim et al. (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of the literature on work-life conflict in the hospitality industry and concluded that leaders must consider individual demographics and characteristics when prescribing work-life support policies. Younger employees may prefer a focus on flexible work schedules, while employees with family care burdens may require varying degrees of assistance depending on marital status and number of dependents. Fast-food leaders can convey empathy by tailoring their approach to offset the burden of work-life conflict.

Antecedents and Consequences of Burnout

Burnout. The consequence of chronic stress in the workplace is burnout. Maslach et al. (2001) defined burnout as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. In the later stages of burnout, employees may become cynical, a manifestation of negative attitudes about the job, and detached toward customers, which can impact customer service outcomes and employee performance (Maslach et al., 2001). Loss spirals described in the COR theory's second corollary are closely related to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Hobfoll et al., 2018). The initial loss, which can be any trigger, brings further loss and stress in an iterative manner that gains momentum. Burnout is, in essence, a loss spiral, and employees cannot quickly exit the spiral because the cascading stress hinders the ability of individuals to invest in resources and offset resource loss.

Researchers have studied burnout in the restaurant industry because irregular and extended work shifts coupled with high levels of customer engagement can lead to physical and emotional exhaustion. As a result, employees frequently experience decreased job satisfaction and decreased job performance (Al-Badarneh et al., 2019). Al-Badarneh et al. (2019) found that burnout increases turnover intention. The retention of food service workers is a significant challenge with the prevalence of burnout.

Emotional Exhaustion. In the fast-food industry, researchers have used the COR theory to understand employee emotional exhaustion, an antecedent of burnout. Emotional exhaustion is defined as the experience of fatigue due to extreme job demands (Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion results from the depletion of emotional resources. Chen and Eyoun (2021) suggested that fear of COVID-19 increased frontline employee emotional exhaustion because employees invested all their available resources in coping with the fear of the disease, leading to reduced resources available to cope with work stress. Ayadit and Chitta (2021) suggested that foodservice workers, in addition to the stresses of COVID-19, experienced increased job stress related to transitions in job practice. Additional job stresses include contactless dining, a shift from indoor to outdoor eating options, and increased sanitation practices (Ayadit & Chitta, 2021). Each adaptation to new job practices can lead to physical and mental exhaustion. From a COR theory perspective, employees can develop emotional exhaustion if they have insufficient resources to cope with work stress.

Emotional Labor. Another antecedent of burnout in the fast-food industry includes the emotional labor that arises from work stress and customer incivility.

Frontline employees may confront customer incivility in daily tasks while upholding the customer-first strategy is commonplace in the fast-food industry (Bi et al., 2021). In line with this strategy, frontline employees work under the expectation to provide quality customer service regardless of the customer's behavior (Alola et al., 2019). Customer incivility refers to customers' harassment directed at the frontline employee. Bi et al. (2021) found that employees most often endure customer behaviors of verbal abuse, including impolite speech, offensive language, rudeness, and less frequently, physical abuse or sexual harassment. The authors concluded that customer incivility led to increased job stress. Employees tend to cope with emotional labor strategies to deal with customer incivility and job stress.

Emotional labor can refer to surface acting, which is hiding true feelings instead of displaying emotions and behaviors aligned with organizational expectations, such as friendliness and positiveness, even in emotionally negative situations (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Frontline fast-food employees typically work under the expectation to provide quality customer service regardless of the customer's behavior (Alola et al., 2019). As a result of emotional labor, employees suppress negative feelings, such as anger and frustration, that may arise from customer interactions. The emotional dissonance may cause job stress and deplete an employee's emotional resources.

Overcoming Burnout. Fast-food leaders can promote employee personal resource development to offset occupational stressors. Personal resource gain can decrease the adverse effects of emotional exhaustion and burnout by increasing the ability of employees to cope with stress (Bakker & de Vries, 2021). Surface acting reduces frontline employees' emotional resources and triggers unhealthy mental outcomes, such as increased anxiety and depression (Xiong et al., 2023). Frontline employees experiencing burnout are less likely to comply with food safety behaviors, which is critical in fast-food establishments (Mahasuweerachai, 2022). Research suggests that coping strategies can help employees conserve their remaining resources under the chronic stress of emotional labor (Choi et al., 2019). By promoting coping skills, fast-food leaders can encourage employees to develop critical personal resources to minimize potential resource losses in the future.

Fast-food leaders can develop strategies to raise awareness of mental health and well-being. Xiang et al. (2023) found that frontline employees could reduce the stress caused by customer incivility through intrinsic resource nurturing. Employers can provide organizational tools to cultivate intrinsic resource nurturing while demonstrating empathy and support for employees. Fast-food leaders should offer stress management training, counseling services, systematic training, and employee assistance programs (Bi et al., 2021; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Xiang et al., 2023). Such programs may improve work engagement in frontline employees coping with abusive work environments and surface acting (Yu et al., 2023). Fast-food leaders can offer stress management training programs to foster employee resource development.

Mindfulness training can help employees recognize and cope with burnout. Mindfulness, defined as an objective awareness of the present moment, is a skill that employees can develop to enrich their resource reservoirs when coping with stressful circumstances arising from frequent face-to-face interactions (Krick et al., 2021). Chen and Eyoun (2021) found that mindfulness may help employees perceive reduced threat levels of resource loss and increased job control, which can reduce the perception of job insecurity. From a COR theory perspective, fast-food leaders who offer stress management training programs foster employee resource development and help protect employees' psychological well-being.

While mindfulness often leads to desirable outcomes, leaders should consider various ways to strengthen employee well-being. Yang and Xu (2023) suggested mindfulness could exacerbate the adverse effects of abusive work environments, leading to increased rumination that is difficult to overcome. On the other hand, employees may suffer from an impaired ability to be mindful because of abusive work environments, which cause emotional exhaustion (Said & Tanova, 2021). Increasing mindfulness should not be a standalone intervention but should be done as part of the holistic improvement of the work environment, including removing stressors.

Boreout

A relative of burnout, equally prevalent in the fast-food industry, is boreout. In the fast-food industry, frontline employees may face routine downtime, monotony, and boredom when waiting for customers or performing routine tasks, resulting in counterproductive work behaviors (Lofty et al., 2022). Boreout, which refers to a lack of career growth and meaning, results when employees are understimulated by repetitive or unchallenging work (Abubakar et al., 2022). LeCunff (2020) suggested boreout results in exhaustion, cynicism, and decreased psychological well-being, leading to disengagement, demotivation, and employee dissatisfaction. The high degree of job standardization can lead to a decline in mental growth and result in boredom and stagnancy, which depletes personal resources.

Fast-food leaders can help nurture environments that decrease the impact of boreout. Abubakar et al. (2022) theorized that workplace incivility exacerbated employee boreout, because mistreatment in the workplace may result in isolation and exclusion of the targeted employee from work units, resulting in doing tasks alone, leading boredom and potentially a decreased perception of growth. Koo et al. (2020) suggested that employers who provide emotional rewards, such as compliments and new opportunities, and material rewards, such as promotions, help employees overcome crises of meaning. An example of an emotional award is recognition. Presslee et al. (2023) examined the relationship between team-based nonmonetary recognition programs, which supplied thank-you cards and small, token gifts hand-delivered by senior management, in six fast-food restaurants for 12 weeks. The authors found that recognition programs positively and directly affected fast-food employee engagement and effort. Employee recognition programs can be an effective means to offset the stress of boreout.

Aside from rewards, fast-food leaders should consider job enrichment to reduce the impact of boreout. Frontline employees who are intrinsically passionate about work, even when faced with high levels of job stress, experience higher job satisfaction than employees with a low passion for work (Benitez et al., 2023). In other words, an employee’s internalization of passion for work is a motivational, personal resource. Leaders can promote the internalization of work through job enrichment. Job enrichment includes task rotation, enhanced work content, and adding variety to work to introduce new knowledge and skills to employees (Abubakar et al., 2022; Benitez et al., 2023). From a COR perspective, if an employee has the intrinsic personal resource of passion for work, job enrichment tasks would not deplete resources and would instead generate additional resource gains.

Resource Gain at Work and Fostering Resource Gain

Physical, psychological, social, and organizational resource gain can offset the resource depletion cost incurred on the job. Job resources are also investments in employee resource reservoirs, which can help employees achieve work goals and foster growth and development (Hobfoll, 2001). As such, organizational features can improve and maintain employee life satisfaction (Hassan et al., 2021). Healthy organizations should strive toward environments that sustain rich resource passageways. Resources such as financial and non-financial compensation, resilience, and psychological safety can be used by employers to expand resource reservoirs (Ayadit & Chitta, 2021). Fast-food leaders can create work environments that foster and protect, rather than detract, employee resource reservoirs.

Compensation

The compensation employees receive in exchange for work is an energy resource that can be used to obtain other resources. Direct compensation includes salary and incentives paid to the employee, while indirect compensation refers to benefits such as paid time off and retirement, education, and medical plans (Naveed et al., 2020). Employees require adequate pay to support their personal needs (LeBaron et al., 2022). Employees perceive salary as an indicator of fairness and equality (Pottenger, 2021).

Salaries are directly linked to an employee’s recruitment, performance, and turnover intention (Shtembari et al., 2022). According to the COR theory, when employees perceive salaries as adequate, they would perceive no threat of resource loss and instead be motivated to acquire more resources.

Fast-food leaders tend to use compensation strategies to retain employees. Beckett (2023) suggested that 80% of fast-food establishments offered higher salaries, which increased by 1.3% per month through the end of 2022 because of industry worker shortage compared to December 2021. This tactic was also used during the COVID-19 pandemic when labor shortages forced a 10% increase in hourly wages for restaurant employees (Shen, 2021). However, the persistent labor shortage following the wage increases suggests that direct compensation alone was insufficient to buffer employee resources from workplace stresses.

Direct and Indirect Compensation

Another factor aside from the direct, transactional reward of salaries employers can provide to increase retention is indirect compensation. Indirect compensation includes employment benefits characterized as relational awards (Sakar, 2023). Naveed et al. (2020) suggested that relational awards are purposive and satisfy employees psychologically by fulfilling intellectual demands. Such nonfinancial rewards include responsibility, recognition, respect, and autonomy. Teo et al. (2021) found that frontline restaurant employees use job autonomy as a critical resource to cope with work-related stress. Frontline fast-food employees with more job autonomy can also enhance consumer experience as the employee can determine how to build customer rapport (Qiu et al., 2020). Employees encouraged with workplace autonomy can better take charge and responsibility and perceive meaningfulness in work.

Organizational human resources practices in the restaurant industry build an environment that fosters rich resource passageways for employees. Rich resource passageways, which arise from practices such as competitive compensation and job training, can increase performance and decrease turnover intention in frontline employees (Boon et al., 2019). Job training, cross-training, or job-enrichment activities focused on abilities or practices that develop employee knowledge and skills to perform tasks well positively affect employee job satisfaction and increases employee personal resources (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2023). Satisfied employees may be less likely to leave their place of employment.

Turnover intentions may decrease when employees are motivated in their work. Work motivation may increase when employees perceive an opportunity for career development (Cimbaljevic et al., 2020). Employees with greater career satisfaction and increased organizational support are more likely to stay with their organizations (Chang & Busser, 2020). Fast-food leaders could consider career counseling services through traineeship programs or professional advancement programs, which can demonstrate organizational investment in talent while providing employees a pathway for meaningful career advancement (Goh & Okumus, 2020). Butler and Hammer (2019) conducted a qualitative study for 2 years to explore the lived experiences of 39 fast-food leaders. The authors found that most leaders began as frontline crew members and were exposed to a high degree of upward career mobility and systematic training for practical and soft skills, which tend to result in meaningful feelings such as pride and dignity. Fast-food leaders who invest in developing employee resources can increase job satisfaction and increase talent retention.

Retention programs within fast-food establishments must accommodate financial and nonfinancial compensation. Work overload and career stagnancy increase turnover intention in hospitality workers (Haldorai et al., 2019). To increase the attractiveness of the pay structure in the fast-food industry, leaders could consider monetary incentives or bonuses as rewards for excellent service, which should be clearly communicated to employees (Goh & Okumus, 2020). McCartney et al. (2022) found that a balanced workload and adequate pay influence job satisfaction and limit turnover intention, which calls for leaders to consider job matching, upskilling, and promotion to increase retention. Lyons and Bandura (2020) similarly suggested that leaders consider strategies that meet employees' desires for development, training, and sufficient and competitive financial compensation to encourage employees to stay. Fast-food leaders can use financial and nonfinancial compensation strategies to retain frontline employees because employees will be less likely to seek higher wages or opportunities for intellectual development in other organizations or industries.

Psychological Capital

From a COR theory perspective, psychological capital may be a personal resource that individuals use to offset the pressures of work-family conflict in the restaurant industry. Psychological capital is a positive, multi-dimensional resource, comprised of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (Obeng et al., 2021). Yin et al. (2018) concluded that psychological capital buffered the relationship between emotional labor and emotional exhaustion for frontline restaurant employees. Psychological capital positively relates to employee well-being at work and moderates the relationship between well-being and job stressors (Bajrami et al., 2022). The components of psychological capital are consistent with the COR theory resource caravans, in which each dimension travels together and builds off one another.

Resilience. Resilience is a personal resource and aspect of psychological capital that may help employees cope with workplace stressors. Resilience is defined as an employee's ability to manage stress healthily, prepare for future challenges, and rebound from setbacks (Hartman et al., 2019). Resilience is associated with lessening employee job-related stress and decreasing turnover intention (Lai & Cai, 2022). Resources that increase resilience are often self-aspect, personal resources related to increasing an individual's ability to cope successfully with environmental stress (Hobfoll, 1989). Halbesleben et al. (2014) suggested that individuals receive the most benefit from and are thus most motivated to conserve and acquire resources, such as involvement and job control, that increase one's sense of control. Fast-food leaders could enhance resilience through targeted support to increase employees' sense of job control.

Fostering Resilience Through Job Control. Leaders can use human resource management practices to foster resilience. Practices that allow frontline employees to be autonomous or involved with organizational decisions can help reduce burnout (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2023). Interventions that increase employees' job autonomy include personalizing tasks, providing flexible work hours, streamlining procedures, or introducing incentivized challenges or competitions (Xie et al., 2023). Participation in decision-making can help build employee trust in the organization and a sense of job security (Jung et al., 2021; Karatape et al., 2022;). From a COR theory perspective, employees are provided job resources that can be used to help them achieve their desired state either in the organization or in life.

Job crafting also allows employees to alter perceptions of available resources, actively fostering resilience. Job crafting is an employee's active role in changing work meanings and resources to fulfill goals (Yang et al., 2022). Despite the emotional labor that results from frontline employees' interactions, employees demonstrate job crafting behaviors to acquire more resources, which increases job performance (Lu et al., 2022). Job crafting and resilience protect employees from emotional labor and promote the attitudes necessary to provide quality service (Yang et al., 2022). Consistent with the COR theory, individuals who job craft can proactively shape work experiences to offset resource loss and promote resource gain.

Work Environment

Work environment, or work climate, affects every aspect of how an employee experiences work. Employees view their work climate as positive or negative, affecting their intention to stay or leave their jobs. Kurniawaty et al. (2019) suggested work environment can foster productive organizational culture resulting in increased job satisfaction. A significant contributor for frontline employees is the psychosocial benefit of positive workplace relationships among colleagues (Stamolampros et al., 2019). Peer support can buffer the effects of burnout and reduce noncompliant behaviors, such as social loafing, leading to reduced turnover and improved performance (Akgunduz & Eryilmaz, 2018). Ayadit and Chitta (2021) suggested that peer support should be established as part of organizational culture to mitigate the impact of burnout. From a COR theory perspective, employees are likely to use any available social support, such as workplace relationships, to protect existing resources. Coworker support is a valuable job resource that employees may strive to maintain.

A negative work environment is associated with decreased job satisfaction, reduced employee engagement, and increased employee turnover. Factors that contribute to a negative work environment include coworker relationships. The hospitality industry has the highest reported incidents of peer harassment and bullying claims among all sectors (Ram, 2018). Previous research in this industry suggests that negative coworker treatment is linked with higher absenteeism rates, decreased performance, and turnover (Haldorai et al., 2019). Abusive coworker treatment, defined as nonphysical hostility, negatively impacts employee well-being and increases psychological distress (Yang & Xu, 2023). Entry-level restaurant employees, particularly new hires, who perceive coworker abuse, experience increased turnover (Tews, 2019). Fast-food leaders who can effectively encourage a cohesive team environment may be better equipped to retain frontline employees.

Fast-food leaders should consider workplace fun to enhance employee retention. Fun work environments positively impact organizational commitment, employee engagement, and job performance and reduce turnover in fast-food employees (Jyoti & Dimple, 2022; Tews et al., 2020; Ulabor & Bosede, 2019). Leaders may follow gamification principles, which suggest collaborative or competitive activities, small celebrations of milestones, and the promotion of exercise to create a fun workplace (Mitchell et al., 2020). Fun activities, including social gatherings and food parties, should be scheduled around shifts to promote meaningful coworker relationships (Jyoti & Dimple, 2022). Leaders should also develop internal networking opportunities to promote supportive behaviors among peer employees (Park & Min, 2020). Fun work environments tend to build the interpersonal and social support structures employees may need to cope with job stress.

According to the COR theory definitions, social support is not a resource as it is neither an object, condition, personal characteristic, or energy. However, Hobfoll et al. (1989) suggested that social resources are interrelated with personal resources and are equally affected by the environment. Social support is instrumental for individuals as it facilitates their ability to gain resources, acting as a resource passageway. Social support is an integral aspect of identity when combined with personal resources.

The Role of Leadership

The leadership approach greatly influences an employee's perception of the work environment. Poor leadership behavior, which can be abusive or passive, is a negative workplace stressor and results in resource depletion. Despotic leadership increases turnover intention (Albashiti et al., 2021). Tews and Stafford (2020) examined the impact of abusive leadership on turnover intention in 980 frontline restaurant employees. The authors concluded that abusive leadership increased turnover intention, particularly in younger employees, by reducing employees' perceptions of supervisor support, personal status, and work environment. Abusive supervision also negatively affects frontline employee resilience, which increases turnover intentions (Dai et al., 2019). Passive or avoidance leadership can also increase employee resentment because leaders ignore employee needs and hesitate in decision-making (Elkhwesky et al., 2022). From a COR perspective, abusive or passive leadership can lead to employee perception of the resource loss of social support, job control, and personal autonomy. As employees perceive resource loss, they will experience increased stress and either defend their remaining resources or obtain resources elsewhere.

Responsive leaders can positively impact employee retention. Frontline employees who perceive a positive relationship with their direct supervisor may be more protected against burnout (Wallace & Coughlan, 2023). Lee et al. (2021) suggested employers should enhance career adaptability while providing ample social support. In other words, highly adaptable employees who perceived strong supervisor and coworker relationships were less likely to leave their hospitality job than those who did not. Similarly, Chong et al. (2023) concluded that supervisor support buffered the effect of job insecurity on burnout and is a practical resource to offset the effects of burnout. Fast-food leaders who effectively support their employees can help reduce the impact of burnout and increase retention.

Employees' perception of organizational support (POS) can rest upon their relationship with their leaders. In the fast-food industry, researchers found that POS moderated the relationship between burnout and satisfaction (Cheng & O-Yang, 2018). Employees who perceive organizational changes as unfair feel increasingly insecure and are more likely to leave their organization voluntarily (Bajrami et al., 2021). Chen and Eyoun (2021) suggested that perceived organizational support is a job resource that moderates the relationship between emotional exhaustion and job insecurity and is most robust when the POS is high. Therefore, the POS can increase employees' belief that an organization recognizes and reward performance. From a COR theory perspective, the POS is the environmental condition that fosters resource protection or growth for an individual and can lead to the added benefit of favorable outcomes for employees and organizations.

Authentic Leadership. Authentic leaders focus on values and authenticity by emphasizing positive psychological resources. Authentic leaders positively influence organizational culture in food service establishments, which may result in positive employee behavior, performance, and decreased turnover intention (Chon & Zolton, 2019; Valk & Yousif, 2023). Abubakar et al. (2022) theorized that authentic leaders are self-aware and better able to promote a positive work climate through transparency and an internal moral perspective, which in turn cultivates high levels of trust, meaningfulness, and moral well-being. Meta-analytic evidence suggests authenticity is strongly linked to employee well-being and engagement, fostering resource gain and potentially leading to employee retention (Sutton, 2020). Fast-food leaders can consider authentic leadership traits to optimism in employees and enhance resource gain, which may lead to retention.

A positive work environment resulting from authentic leadership can increase employee retention through job thriving. Job thriving is a psychological state of learning, vitality, energy, and enthusiasm (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Authentic leadership positively affects employees' behaviors and attitudes by promoting transparency, encouraging reciprocity, and increasing employee thriving (Wu & Chen, 2019). Thriving in the work environment is an indicator that increases employee retention in the hospitality industry (Chang & Busser, 2019). From a COR theory perspective, authentic leadership is a critical social and job resource that may lead to employees acquiring more personal resources through thriving.

Servant Leadership. Servant leadership, which is also an employee-oriented practice, is similar to authentic leadership. Servant leaders focus on the followers' psychological needs through empathy, awareness, building community, and employee development (Bavik, 2020). Interpersonal aspects, such as trust and reciprocity between employee and leader, may facilitate an employee's resource investments to counteract resource loss and promote resource gain (Hablesben et al., 2014). Due to the altruistic, ethical orientation of the servant leader, the ultimate priority is the followers' well-being, which in turn leads to increased employee engagement and effectiveness (Eva et al., 2019). Employees react to leaders' humility with increased affective trust, which, in turn, is negatively related to voluntary turnover (Liborius & Kiewitz, 2022). In short, servant leaders often view themselves as stewards who cultivate and grow an organization's resources, including personnel.

Because servant leaders put employee well-being first, such leaders can create psychological safety, thereby maintaining employee resources. Psychological safety, a positive resource in the workplace, is how individuals perceive the risks and consequences associated with interpersonal communication (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Servant leadership is linked to psychological empowerment (Khan et al., 2022). Psychological empowerment relates to how leaders convey the meaning and impact of the work within the organization, which is linked to increased psychological safety (Zhou & Chen, 2021). Employees who feel confident and competent in their high-impact work are more likely to act without fear, judgment, or punishment.

Frontline employees with psychological safety are linked to decreased perception of psychological stressors and turnover intention in frontline employees (Labrague & De Los Santos, 2020; Luo et al., 2021). Cai et al. (2023) found that the relationship between servant leadership and work resilience was positively correlated and mediated by emotional exhaustion. Using the COR theory, the authors suggested that servant leaders support their employees, which leads to employee resource gain. Psychological safety arises in individuals with ample and sufficient resource reservoirs (Li & Peng, 2022). When employees build their resource pool, they are less likely to perceive job stress and emotional exhaustion and more likely to stay in their positions. Fast-food managers who reinforce a culture of psychological safety are more likely to retain their frontline employees.

Transition

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies some fast-food leaders use to enhance retention of hourly workers. Section 1 included a review of the problem and background of the study, which contained the nature of the study, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the research. I also provided a thorough review of the professional and academic literature. The COR theory was examined in relation to employee retention through an analysis and synthesis of incidences of resource loss and gain in the fast-food industry.

In Section 2, I will discuss the justification for using the qualitative methodology to explore strategies for fast-food leaders to enhance employee retention. This section will include the role of the research, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, data collection instruments and techniques, organizational techniques, data analysis, as well as reliability and validity. In Section 3, I will present my findings, application of findings to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, suggestions for future research, and will conclude the paper.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the effective strategies that some leaders of U.S. fast food institutions use to enhance the retention of hourly frontline workers. The target population of this study were six fast-food industry managers in the capital region of Maryland who had effectively used strategies to enhance the retention of hourly frontline workers. The results of this study may contribute to social change by potentially creating a more productive community. Fast-food leaders' ability to retain frontline employees can lower unemployment levels, thus improving individuals' economic independence and increasing the financial resources contributed back into surrounding areas. Improved employer strategies for employee retention could reduce employee burnout and stress as well as increase employee well-being.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative multiple case study, my role as the researcher was to collect and analyze data honestly and accurately. Researchers should ask open-ended questions, listen accurately, and remain open-minded during the interview process, which is a key component of case study research (Yin, 2018). In this regard, researchers are the primary instrument of data collection and must be aware and reflexive as a cocreator of data with participants (McGrath et al., 2019). Researchers must control their biases throughout the interview process (Bearman, 2019). Researchers use interview protocols, which include a case study overview, data collection procedures, questions, and outline, for guidance and to increase the study's reliability (Yin, 2018). To collect data for the current study, I conducted face-to-face, semistructured interviews and followed an interview protocol, which ensured I did not damage the reliability or validity of the study (see Appendix). Participants had the chance to review their interview transcripts for accuracy.

Qualitative researchers must also make sense of the collected data, which is a crucial stage to ensure personal bias mitigation. Thematic data analysis is a five-step process that includes compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). After collecting data in the compiling stage of this process, the researcher breaks the data apart and reconnects the data to present significant themes. The data analysis will be nonstatistical, and researchers compare existing literature to develop the study. I used transparent criteria and strategies throughout the research process to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

As a human instrument of data collection, I followed the *Belmont Report* as a guide for respecting participants, which included obtaining an informed consent. The principles of the *Belmont Report* include respect for people, participant selection, informed consent, beneficence, justice, and assessment of risks and benefits (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Researchers who follow the principles of the *Belmont Report* can mitigate harm and allow the realization of the study's full benefits (Brothers et al., 2019). I ensured the confidentiality of my participants and took measured steps to safeguard participant data. Before collecting data, I received Walden University Institutional

Review Board (IRB) approval and obtained informed consent from the participants. I then conducted study while adhering to Walden University's IRB requirements.

Researchers must strive to avoid personal and professional biases when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data. Personal and professional connections to organizations and interviewees can lead to unfounded assumptions based on data misinterpretation (Skukauskaite et al., 2022). To further mitigate bias, researchers choose appropriate conceptual framework and thoroughly conduct a review of existing literature (Johnson et al., 2020). My professional experience is outside of the fast-food industry, and I did not have a relationship with any participants in the study that could confer additional insight into the understanding of the study's results. Additionally, I did not have any direct knowledge or experience in executing retention strategies and practices. My interest in the research question stemmed from the similarities between workplace stress and retention in the fast-food industry and that of my profession, the health care industry.

Participants

The target population for the study was fast-food managers in the capital region of Maryland in the United States. Researchers define eligibility criteria to ensure participants correlate to the study's relevance (Yin, 2018). To take part in the current study, participants had to meet the following eligibility criteria: (a) successfully used retention strategies to reduce the turnover of hourly frontline workers, (b) improved frontline employee retention in the last year, and (c) at least 1 year of managerial experience.

I selected potential participants by searching the internet, engaging the local chamber of commerce, and surveying local fast-food establishments. Researchers often face challenges in gaining access to participants. Strategies to help gain access to participants include building rapport with and/or incentivizing participants (Vuban & Eta, 2019). Researchers who clearly communicate the participant's role may be more likely to gain participant trust and participation throughout the interview process (Alexander & Smith, 2019). Because participants donate time in the interviewing process, researchers should rely on contact methods that respect the participants' time (Hopkins & Schwanen, 2022). I initially contacted potential participants through social media outlets or phone calls using a telephone protocol. I established a positive rapport with each participant by fostering a trusting relationship through transparency and respect. I followed up with the participants through email that included the consent form and additional details, including the procedures, voluntary nature of participating in the study, privacy, and risks and benefits to demonstrate transparency. Once participants consented, I offered them various communication channels to get a hold of me to answer any questions or concerns that arose throughout the study.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Researchers can choose among three primary methodologies in research: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Researchers use the qualitative method to understand the participants' lived experiences through in-depth accounts gathered through interviews (Mihosseini, 2020). Qualitative researchers use nonstatistical data for the interpretation and analysis of results (Witell et al., 2020). The qualitative research method was appropriate for this study because it facilitated the exploration of the knowledge, skills, and experiences fast-food managers used to strategically enhance the retention of frontline workers.

Researchers collect data differently when using the quantitative approach. The quantitative methodology involves statistical data to understand relationships between variables (Walczyk & Cockrell, 2022). To draw conclusions, quantitative researchers use a deductive approach to find patterns in data to test hypotheses (Yin, 2018). Researchers do not use the quantitative approach to focus on the analysis of the participants' lived experience. Because I did not attempt to examine relationships among variables and instead explore participants' perspectives, the quantitative method was not appropriate for this study.

A mixed-methods approach was not suitable for this study. Researchers use both inductive and deductive reasoning in a mixed-methods approach (Yin, 2018). Researchers apply statistical analysis to the qualitative aspect of the research study and can confirm the conditions and outcomes of the studied phenomena (Dawadi et al., 2021; Reddy, 2021). While statistical analysis of the relationship between fast-food workplace stressors and retention would have provided additional context to this study, I could not use this data to effectively answer the research question as well as I did using the data obtained through rich narratives. The mixed-methods approach was not appropriate for this study.

Research Design

Qualitative researchers select research designs to adequately explore a research question. The qualitative methodology includes several research designs, such as phenomenology, narrative, and case study (Saunders et al., 2019). Researchers use the case study design to explore a particular phenomenon through the detailed accounts of one or more cases (Yin, 2018). Researchers use open questions involving the "what," "how," and "why" of a phenomenon to explore the participants' lived experiences (Saunders et al., 2019). Multiple case studies may be more beneficial than single case studies because of the increased range of discovery, reliability, and generalizability multiple sources and contexts provide (Pathiranage et al., 2021). The case study design was most appropriate because the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of retention strategies of frontline fast-food employees. I selected the multiple case study design because collecting exhaustive data from more than one organization yielded a broader array of prospective strategies fast-food leaders use to enhance the retention of frontline employees.

The phenomenological and narrative research designs were not suitable for the current research study. Researchers use a phenomenological design to explore the essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological researchers explore personal meanings and patterns within a participants' experience (Groenewald, 2018). I did not select the phenomenological design because retention strategies are not single experiences. In contrast, researchers use a narrative design to tell personal life stories related to a single event or sequence of events (George & Selimos, 2018). Narrative researchers consider the participants' meanings and interpretation of events as the lens to better understand the studied phenomenon (Makrygiannakis & Jack, 2018). The narrative design was unsuitable for the current study because I explored the retention strategies, not life stories, of fast-food managers.

Qualitative researchers must ensure data saturation. Rigorous research techniques that ensure data saturation include using multiple sources of evidence and ensuring the collection of rich and thick data (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rose & Johnson, 2020). Multiple points of data from different sources can strengthen the validity of research findings through triangulation, which provides a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Fusch et al., 2018). Researchers can obtain rich, referring to quality, and thick, referring to quantity, data through in-depth, semistructured interviews (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I conducted six semistructured interviews with fast-food managers to gain insight into the strategies that enhance the retention of frontline workers. I used member checking and data triangulation to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and achieve data saturation. Data saturation was achieved within six interviews, when no new information was presented.

Population and Sampling

Researchers consider various sampling methods, including random, maximum variation, and purposive methods, to identify a study's participant pool (Knechel, 2019). Random sampling is a technique wherein each sample is equally likely to be selected, which may decrease research bias (Matthews & Kostelis, 2019). Random sampling was not suitable for this study because an equal likelihood of managers who are successful and unsuccessful in retention strategies would not have yielded the rich data I sought. Maximum variation sampling entails selecting samples providing the widest range of perspectives on a given topic (Saunders et al., 2019). I did not select a maximum variation sampling method because collected data may have been contradicting given the extreme variance of retention and turnover in the fast-food industry, and this sampling method would have required increased time and a greater number of participants to gain the insight required to explore my research topic.

In qualitative research, researchers may apply a purposive sampling method to select the most relevant sources to gain insight and in-depth understanding to answer a research question (Staller, 2021). I purposively sampled six fast-food managers in the capital region of Maryland who had successfully used strategies to retain hourly frontline employees. Purposively sampled participants should be chosen for their knowledge and direct experience in the field of study (Jashari & Kutllovci, 2020). Access to purposively sampled participants can lead to the development of rich themes to obtain saturation (Knechel, 2019). I excluded managers who did not meet the study's eligibility criteria because they may not have had the opportunity to successfully implement retention strategies in their fast-food establishment. I also excluded participants who did not provide information to respond to the research question or who did not have the availability to support the data collection commitments.

The sample size is an important consideration in qualitative research. Researchers determine an appropriate sample size based on the ability to achieve data saturation (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). Data saturation confirms a study's validity, reliability, and credibility, and results when additional participant interviews do not provide new ideas or information (Fotana et al., 2020; Mwita, 2022). To reach thematic saturation, qualitative researchers can strive for large sample sizes and can also strive for item saliency, in which exhaustive probing leads to more valuable information per participant (Weller et al., 2018). To increase sample efficiency, I probed participants using well-designed interview questions and skillful follow-up questions to increase the amount of information collected per participant. Aside from probing, I ensured interviews took place in comfortable and quiet environments that facilitated confidentiality practices and open sharing. I collected data through interviews until data saturation was reached when I was unable to identify new themes through coding.

Researchers can use additional data points to ensure data saturation. Qualitative researchers use member checking, or participant validation, and follow-up interviews to reach saturation and ensure the credibility of results (Sahakyan, 2023). When member checking, researchers provide a copy of the information collected, such as a transcript, to the participant to confirm accuracy (Motulsky, 2021). With the participant’s consent, I audio recorded all interviews for accuracy. After I transcribed the interviews for data interpretation, I applied member checking by emailing transcript summaries to each participant to confirm my understanding of their responses. Within the same email, I also followed up with any additional questions or points of clarification I needed based on the transcribed interview.

Ethical Research

Researchers must follow ethical principles. Prior to data collection, I obtained Walden University IRB approval (No. 09-08-23-1143766). The IRB is federally mandated to review, approve, and monitor research involving human beings (Lapid et al., 2019). The purpose of the IRB is to protect the welfare and rights of human participants (Grady, 2019). The data collected in this study consisted of participants' face-to-face, semistructured interview responses. Before participating in the study, I screened all participants via telephone following a telephone protocol or face-to-face to explain the general parameters of the study.

Researchers must also obtain informed consent prior to data collection. The informed consent process also indicates voluntary participation. No incentives were offered beyond the participants' potential benefits from receiving new strategies related to the research problem. Researchers respect participants' autonomy by ensuring voluntary participation (Brear, 2020). After a participant expressed interest in the study, I had them sign an informed consent form. As part of the informed consent process and reaffirmed in my interview protocol (see Appendix), I ensured the participants understood they could cancel or withdraw from the data collection process at anytime. Both prior to and after the interview, I gave participants my email address and phone number as contact methods if they chose to withdraw from the study. During the interview, participants could have stopped the interview or left at any time, if desired.

I protected the confidentiality of the participants throughout this study. Researchers can protect participant data by following orderly technical methods, which include removing personal identifiers from data (McKibben et al., 2021). Other strategies include the use of data encryption software and access restriction to data (Hunter et al., 2018). I protected all participant names and organizations by assigning them an alphanumeric case number instead of using their actual names. All files related to the data collection used the alphanumeric case number and were kept in a password-protected file on a locked computer in a house protected by a security system. All documents will be destroyed after 5 years.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the principal instrument of data collection for this research study. Researchers are the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies and must gather data, analyze data, and draw conclusions from the data (Saunders et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Primary, or unpublished data, and secondary, or already published, data are collected by researchers (Taherdoost, 2021). Researchers collect comprehensive primary data through interviews, focus groups, relevant documents, and direct observation (Barrett & Twycross, 2018; Saunders et al., 2019). I used semistructured interviews, observations, and relevant documents to gather data for my research study. I also used secondary data sources from company websites, social networking sites, and publicly available data that support my research question.

I used an interview protocol (see Appendix) when collecting data via the six semistructured interviews. Researchers often use interview protocols to create structure during interviews, which ensure the researcher can consistently and reliably gather data per the study’s objectives (Schaffer, 2021). Additionally, use of interview protocols may produce more truthful responses from participants (Kaliber, 2019). I began by introducing myself and explaining the parameters of the study and assured participants that interviews would not exceed 60 minutes. Qualitative research interviewers develop and follow interview protocols to adhere to the purpose of the study, while establishing trust and responding appropriately to participant responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). I also took field notes during the interview to capture nonverbal indications, facial and body language, or notable occurrences, but not at the expense of forming a genuine connection with my participant. I asked eight open-ended interview questions and followed up with probing questions as needed.

I requested and gathered relevant organizational documents during the interview. Multiple points of data sources can strengthen the validity of research findings (Fusch et al., 2018). Additional data sources include authoritative documents and observations (Campbell & Brauer, 2020). Organizational documents provided by the fast-food manager gave insight to the implemented strategies to enhance employee retention. I also collected information from the fast-food chain website or other publicly available organizational data to support my central research question.

I used techniques to enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection process. Researchers use member checking to verify the accuracy of the data collected (Sahakyan, 2023). I applied member checking by emailing a copy of the transcript summary to each participant to confirm my understanding as the researcher. During the transcript review, I removed any inaccuracies identified by the participant and retracted comments. If organizational documents were collected, I discussed the purpose and the use of each document with the participant to ensure I interpreted the intention accurately.

Data Collection Technique

For this study, I used the data collection techniques of semistructured interviews and a review of relevant organizational documents. Semistructured interviews are useful in the collection of rich, thick data, which is paramount in studies focused on exploration of participant perspective and experiences (Brosy et al., 2020). Semistructured interviews are partly standardized, but still allow for flexibility during the interview for the researcher to follow up on pertinent pieces of information (Miller, 2017). Researchers ask open-ended questions in semistructured interviews to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). In my study, the primary data technique was face-to-face interviews, which were audio recorded with participant consent. Researchers suggest alternative methods, such as virtual interviews, when face-to-face interviews are deemed neither convenient or comfortable (Howlett, 2022). I offered Zoom interviews to participants, in case they preferred a virtual option, because I could still observe nonverbal communication and record the interview within the software platform with consent. Researchers note observations in field journals, which can enhance the quality of collected data and data analysis (Yin, 2018). I took field notes and journal participant's verbal and nonverbal responses, which may have generated additional follow-up questions for participants.

I also requested and gathered relevant organizational documents during the interview. Multiple points of data sources can strengthen the validity of research findings

(Fusch et al., 2018). Additional data sources include authoritative documents and observations (Campbell & Brauer, 2020). Organizational documents provided by the fast-food manager may have given insight to the implemented strategies to enhance employee retention. If organizational documents were available, I discussed the purpose and the use of each document with the participant to ensure I interpreted the intention accurately. I also collected information from the fast-food chain website or other publicly available organizational data to support my central research question. By using multiple data collection techniques of primary and secondary data sources, I increased the validity and reliability of my study through data triangulation.

Qualitative researchers use member checking to increase research credibility. Member checking, or participant validation, is a verification process of the accuracy of the data collected (Sahakyan, 2023). When member checking, researchers provide a copy of the collected of the information collected, such as a transcript, to the participant to confirm accuracy (Motulsky, 2021). I applied member checking by emailing a summary of the transcript to each participant to confirm my understanding as the researcher. If any relevant organizational documents were collected, I applied member checking to ensure my interpretation of the data was correct. I used member checking to ensure accurate interpretation of data and to increase the rigor of my research.

Data Organization Technique

Researchers must organize data throughout the research process. The research process generates a significant amount of relevant data (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). Researchers can protect participant data by following orderly technical methods, which include removing personal identifiers from data (McKibben et al., 2021). Other strategies include the use of data encryption software and access restriction to data (Hunter et al., 2018). I used a password-protected computer and password-protected relevant files to protect the integrity of the data. I backed my files up on a flash drive, which was stored in a locked safe within my home. Hard copies, such as informed consent forms, were kept in a locked file cabinet. After 5 years, I will delete and destroy any data related to the study per Walden University IRB guidelines.

Data organization techniques include research logs, data catalogs, and reflective journals (Yin, 2018). Qualitative researchers use reflective journals to gain additional insight into phenomena (Lehmann et al., 2019). Reflective journalling can facilitate metacognition and self-engagement and enhance objectivity, which can lead to new understandings on the studied phenomena (Draissi, 2021). I transcribed participants' interviews into a Microsoft Word document. To mitigate personal bias, I used a reflective journal to record my thoughts and precepts related to the research process, including the interviews, interactions, and analysis. I used Microsoft Excel to track each participant's collected data and organization data by an assigned alphanumeric code. Each participant had an assigned, password-protected file. Within each file, I placed the any notes or observations I journalled during the interview, transcripts, and recorded audio files.

Data Analysis

I analyzed my findings using Yin's (2018) five-step data analysis procedure. Qualitative researchers should follow specific processes to ensure a thorough and logical analysis of the collected data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Yin identified the following thematic data analysis stages: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding.

In the first and second stages of data analysis, I collected my data by conducting semistructured interviews with each participant and by gathering secondary data sources provided by the participant or by internet searches. I deconstructed the collected data by transcribing the interviews. I listened to the recorded data multiple times to manually transcribe the interviews in Microsoft Word. I reviewed the field notes capturing participant nonverbal cues and vocal tones. I used member checking to verify the reliability of the gathered data.

In the third stage of data analysis, I reassembled the data by developing codes, grouping similar codes to establish categories, and themes. Researchers use coding to understand the collected data in relation to the central research question (Yin, 2018). Researchers may use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, which may improve the data analysis process and end-product (Roddesnes et al., 2019). NVivo is an example of a qualitative data analysis program which offers tools to help the human researcher sort, organize, and visualize data (Dhakal, 2022). I used NVivo Version 14 to organize and identify patterns and themes in the transcripts and any obtained organizational documents. During this phase, I went line-by-line in the data to identify codes, then divided the evidence into small and manageable parts for comparison to connect essential themes.

In the final stages of data analysis, I used data triangulation to establish reliability and validity to interpret my findings. I reached data saturation by ensuring no new information was uncovered. I also ensured my findings were consistent with the conceptual framework of the study, the conservation of resources theory, and extant literature. I concluded by discussing recommendations for action and future research.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

In qualitative studies, researchers must ensure reliability. Reliability refers to the consistency and the ability to replicate the study's findings (Saunders et al., 2019; Yin, 2018). Researchers use strategies such as interview protocols to increase reliability of research studies (Nassaji, 2020). These strategies provide detail and transparency for the rationale of research design, which can further increase reliability (Coleman, 2022). Interview protocols facilitate an inquiry-based conversation, and provide a systematic, replicable, and comprehensive way for researchers to collect rich qualitative data (Schaffer, 2021). To enhance the reliability of my study, I used an interview protocol (see Appendix).

Dependability of the results further enhances the reliability of a study. Dependability refers to the ability for the study to be repeated to produce the same results (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Rigorous data collection techniques and procedures can increase dependability (Saunders et al., 2019). I provided clear and detailed descriptions of the research question, conceptual framework, research design, and data collection. Member checking, or participant validation, and follow-up interviews ensure credibility of results (Sahakyan, 2023). To ensure reliability in my study, I used member checking to verify my understanding of the collected data. I provided transcript summaries to participants for member checking. I provided the participants with summaries of my interpretations I collected from company websites or shared relevant documents for verification.

Validity

Qualitative researchers must ensure trustworthiness, or validity, in a study's findings. Validity is defined as the extent to which studies accurately evaluate the studied phenomena, which can be ensured through credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Noble & Heale, 2019). Credibility refers to the confidence and truthfulness of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Researchers can also use data triangulation and member checking to ensure credibility (Ellis, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Data triangulation refers to the use of multiple data collection methods to arrive at the same results, which increases confidence in the study's findings (Denzin, 1970). I used data triangulation to corroborate my findings by drawing themes from multiple sources of data, which include semistructured interviews, relevant organizational documents, publicly available data, and a thorough review of academic literature.

Transferability is another aspect of validity. Transferability refers to the degree to which a study's findings may be generalized (Yin, 2018). In qualitative research, transferability adds knowledge to a phenomenon when research findings can be applied to broader groups, such as different industries or populations (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Researchers ensure transferability by providing thick descriptions of the study, which entails describing the behaviors and experiences of participants within the context

(Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I provided a rich account of descriptive data, including information on the setting, sample and participants, interview protocol and topics.

Confirmability is also important in ensuring trustworthy data. Confirmability refers to the extent the study's findings are not impacted by the subjectivity and biases of the researcher (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). Researchers ensure confirmability by describing the steps of the research process in detail to reduce bias and to ensure results can be repeated by other researchers (Yin, 2018). Researchers can also ensure confirmability by creating an audit trail, which contains detailed notes on the researcher's decisions, data management and analysis, and reflective thoughts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity involves concrete practices, such as journaling, wherein researchers account for the impact subjectivity has on the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). I created an audit trail by taking field notes and keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research process, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of my study. I also ensured confirmability by clearly describing the coding during data analysis. To lessen the impact of researcher bias, I used member checking to confirm the accuracy of the participant interviews and use method triangulation.

To ensure I had sampled enough participants in my study to adequately answer the central research question, I achieved data saturation within five interviews. I conducted a sixth interview to confirm data saturation. Researchers use data saturation to ensure data adequacy in a purposive sample and to confirm a study's validity, reliability, and credibility (Fotana et al., 2020; Hennick & Kaiser, 2022). Data saturation results when additional participant interviews do not provide new ideas or information, which allows for the establishment of connection and congruence across the collected data at a conceptual level (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Mwita, 2022). I achieve data saturation when I was unable to identify new themes through coding and when no new information was presented from my participants.

Transition and Summary

In this qualitative multiple case study, I explored the effective strategies that some leaders of U.S. fast food institutions use to enhance the retention of hourly frontline workers. Section 2 contained the purpose of the study, research methods and design, population and sampling, and ethical research. In this study, I served as the primary data collection instrument, and in Section 2, I explained data collection techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis. Section 2 concluded with a discussion on reliability and validity. In Section 3, I will discuss the findings of the study, application to professional practice, and implications for social change. I will conclude with recommendations for action and future research.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the effective strategies that some leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers. Six fast-food managers in the capital region of Maryland with direct knowledge and oversight of frontline workers participated in the study. The collected data included their face-to-face, semistructured interview responses, my field notes, and a review of relevant organizational documents. After data analysis, I identified four key themes: (a) effective recruiting and onboarding strategies, (b) competitive direct and indirect compensation, (c) leadership characteristics, and (d) supportive and fun workplace culture. All themes aligned with the COR theory because each commonality discovered through the data collection process involved the investment in employee resource pools through various interventions at organization, job, and manager levels.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for my study was: What strategies do some leaders of U.S. fast-food institutions use to enhance the retention of frontline workers? To answer this question, I interviewed six managers in the capital region of Maryland who had successfully enhanced the retention of frontline workers. I followed an interview protocol (see Appendix) and asked each of the six participants the same eight open-ended interview questions. On September 8, 2023, I received Walden University IRB approval to conduct the study after I gained access to each partner organization. The data collection process took approximately 2 weeks, spanning from September 12 to

September 28. To safeguard participant confidentiality, I assigned each participant an alphanumeric case number: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. I labeled each participant's organization a corresponding number: Org1, Org2, Org3, Org4, and Org5. Each participant worked for a unique fast-food organization, except for P5 and P6 who both represented Org5. I removed any organizational identifiers from printed materials and used the assigned alphanumeric case numbers during all interviews, member checking, and the storage of information.

During the data collection process, I audio recorded each hour-long interview using my iPhone. I simultaneously took field notes and observed the participant's nonverbal behaviors. I conducted member checking via email within a week of the interview to ensure any interpretation of the interview responses or organizational records was accurate. During this interaction, participants also had the opportunity to clarify or add information; however, no additional information was received during the member checking process. Upon analyzing the data, I found that data saturation was achieved after five interviews because I did not identify any additional themes. I interviewed the sixth participant to confirm data saturation.

I listened to the audio recordings and transcribed each interview word-for-word in Microsoft Word. I listened to the recordings multiple times to ensure transcription accuracy and compared each transcribed interview against my field notes. Each transcription was imported into NVivo 14 for organization, analysis, coding, and categorization of the data. I also reviewed and analyzed internal and public organizational documents as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Publicly Available and Internal Documents Reviewed for Data Analysis

Organization code	Documents reviewed
Org1	Internal training program Internal interview questions Internal benefits overview Company website
Org2	Internal training program Internal recognition cards Company website
Org3	Internal recognition board Internal community involvement example Internal employee development goal example Company website
Org4	Company website
Org5	Company website

After triangulating different data sources, four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) effective recruiting and onboarding strategies, (b) competitive direct and indirect compensation, (c) leadership characteristics, and (d) supportive and fun workplace culture. Table 3 details the subthemes associated with each theme, the frequency each theme was discussed by participants in interview responses, and the percentage of all responses per theme. In the following subsections, I discuss each theme in detail, explore the relationship of each theme in current literature, then align the emergent themes with the COR theory.

Table 3

Summary of Emergent Themes, Subthemes, and Frequencies

Theme	Subtheme	Mentions	Percentage
Effective recruiting and onboarding strategies	Referrals Social media presence Talent management Training program Buddy system	156	32
Competitive direct and indirect compensation	Pay Benefits Perks Reward and recognition Growth opportunity	183	38
Leadership characteristics	Open communication Perceived fairness Servant leadership qualities	85	17
Supportive and fun workplace culture	Employee interest groups Workplace fun Organizational culture	64	13
Total		488	100

Theme 1: Effective Recruiting and Onboarding Strategies

Effective recruiting and onboarding strategies was the first theme that emerged from data analysis. All six participants in the study discussed successful recruitment and onboarding strategies as meaningful ways to reduce frontline employee turnover. The subthemes that emerged under Theme 1 were referrals, social media presence, talent management, training programs, and buddy systems.

Recruiting

Referrals. Using referral sources was a strategy related to effective recruitment targeting the ideal frontline employee. P3 stated,

> Keeping employees starts with bringing the right employee through the doors. My people give me reliable new hires because they know the new ones will lighten

> the load for the team. People want to work for the company after they experience the enthusiasm from the team, either from their friend who referred them, or by walking through and seeing the team working together.

P3 noted that referrals are typically how she gets her cashiers and part-time hires, all of whom have stayed on for over a year. Similarly, P1 suggested most of his current employees were hired from referral sources and that he preferred referrals because the referring employees can vouch for and support the recruit. Additionally, the referring employee could convey the expectations and demands of the job. P1 shared,

> We get a lot of referrals because there is a good vibe about working here. One of my employees just said the other day, "I actually really like working here. Can my friend work here too?" We are just a desirable place to work, and they all want to keep it that way.

Employees at Org1 and Org 4 were incentivized to make good referrals by receiving referral bonuses and by the desire to maintain an ideal work environment.

Creating a Social Media Presence. The next recruiting subtheme was creating a social media presence. P4 used a social media presence to attract his desired employees by showcasing an ideal work environment. P4 noted said that social media platforms are "used by most of our applicants and they can see who we are…. It's a solid place to advertise why an employee should want to work here," referring to how the chain has been voted a best place to work for inclusivity and uplifting environment. P4 noticed that when discussing why applicants want to work for him, they note that what they see at the franchise "is exciting and looks like a place where they can have fun while earning money.” P3 similarly used a social media platform to post pictures of the good times employees have together, capture positive community outreach events, and advertise job opening and benefits. P3 added that “when you post pictures online and people still want to come to work here, they know what kind of culture they can expect here and are willing, excited to be a part of it.”

Talent Management. Some participants used a standardized interview process to manage talent and select the best candidates. Even before formal interviews, P6 conducted a prescreening of potential candidates, stating,

> It helps set up the expectation of who we are, what we do here, and what opportunities you will be presented with here. People get a good grasp of if they’re going to enjoy working here or not even before they walk into the interview.

P6 also removed applicants during the prescreen, noting applicants “applying everywhere, just casually looking for a job are not usually the people that end up doing super well here.” P1 used the interview process to inform candidates of the expectations of the job and ascertain whether the applicant is a culture fit. Following a standard list of investigatory questions and a consistent interview approach, P1 set up panel interviews to hire candidates who demonstrate the “motivation, capabilities, and passion to deliver the experience our customers need, be a good team player, and embody the company’s mission and values.”

Onboarding

Comprehensive Training. Once hired, new employees should be supported with effective onboarding through comprehensive training. P1 discussed a rigorous training program, stating, “we bring people in, then we train them well.” P1 provided general training for all tasks associated with the job in addition to customer service training, such as de-escalation training. Trainers at Org1 not only followed a dedicated training schedule for all duties performed for new hires, but trainers also received a monetary bonus when the trainee stayed on after the training period. Similarly, P5 noted all hourly workers receive a 40-hour orientation because “that level of training increases the level of ownership of an employee…they come out well-trained, well-prepared to do all of the jobs or positions.” A comprehensive training process may help retain newly hired employees by providing the skills needed for success.

Buddy System. The participants also used a buddy system beginning at the time of hire to engage and retain frontline employees. P2 established a buddy system, pairing a new hire with a tenured member in the same food prep station. While there are no incentives to be a buddy, buddies help the new hire integrate into the culture of the franchise. P2 reported,

> Buddies help the new employees understand training and procedures. I find new guys are not lost at all because they see how it should be done right away. Because they are working shoulder-to-shoulder, friendship develops quickly, naturally, and the new employee feels like they belong here very quickly.

P3 also said that she paired new hires with her best-performing frontline employees that are not functioning as trainers. These buddies often reinforce team or franchise policies and “serve as good role models, a friendly face [who new hires] can turn to for support.” Under a buddy system, new hires have multiple contacts to gain clarity on job functions and jumpstart relationship building within the first few weeks of work.

Correlation to Existing Literature

Findings from the current study support existing research that recruiting strategy impacts employee retention in the fast-food industry. Organizations using sustainable recruitment and selection systems are more likely to retain employees (Ghani et al., 2022). Using social media to promote the company is an effective recruitment strategy in the industry to attract frontline employee talent (Ghani et al., 2022). During the recruitment process, effective communication of benefits may signal organizational investment and support of the frontline employee, resulting in more talented individuals applying (Jolly et al., 2020). Using social media to demonstrate an organization’s commitment to nurturing the frontline employee may draw talent more likely to stay from the applicant pool.

The finding of effective onboarding strategies is consistent with the literature on frontline employee retention in the fast-food industry. Training and establishing mentorship or buddy programs help new hires acclimate to the workplace culture and demands, which may increase talent retention (Goh & Okumus, 2020). Such programs may encourage open dialogue about job expectations and career growth desires (Ghani et al., 2022). Findings from the current study suggest employees given the skills to perform job requirements through training and support are more likely to stay with the fast-food organization beyond onboarding.

Theme 2: Competitive Direct and Indirect Compensation

Competitive direct and indirect compensation was the second theme that emerged from the data analysis. All six participants in the study discussed the impact of direct and indirect compensation in their efforts to reduce frontline employee turnover. The subthemes that emerged under Theme 2 were pay, benefits, perks, reward and recognition, and growth opportunity.

Direct Compensation

The participants reported that direct compensation above minimum wage or better-than-market compensation contributed to increased frontline employee retention. P1 noted, “the pay is better than most competitors in the area, and the benefits are really good. That’s big when you are talking about retention.” Similarly, P5 stated, “the first thing that we think about whenever we meet to discuss how to attract and retain employees is how we have to have a competitive wage strategy…and we try to be generous with our benefits.” P4 also described their frontline employee base pay as extremely competitive, above minimum wage, for the region and market.

Some participants provided employees with the ability to obtain paychecks readily or increase pay based on hours worked. Employees of Org4 received paychecks on a weekly basis as opposed to a typical biweekly system. P4 suggested, “some employees feel they cannot access their pay quickly enough, so to acknowledge the need for quick compensation, we give out paychecks weekly.” The threat of inadequate pay is further negated by the opportunity to earn more by picking up additional shifts. P1 and P4 use apps or team communication boards to post shift availabilities, which allow frontline employees to trade for or take additional shifts. P1 indicated that employees who work overtime get paid time and a half and often elect to do so because they “need the extra income and it’s not a requirement asked of them all the time.” P4 shared that “this is a huge draw for some employees, especially when they may be needing more in the moment. It’s great we can provide that opportunity.”

Indirect Compensation

Benefits. The participants reported that competitive benefits were equally important as a retention strategy. All organizations offer health benefits, including dental, vision, and medical, and some organizations, such as Org1 and Org4, offered employee assistance programs and access to mental and emotional wellness programs, such as Headspace or Lyra Health. Employees of Org1 and Org4 are offered a 401K with matching, while those of Org5 offered a nonelective 401K. P2 noted that the provision of these competitive benefits were “essential…a deal-breaker for some of my employees.” P5 similarly stated, “the benefits are very generous, but a lot of people in our industry are giving similar benefits. You have to go beyond.”

Participants also used benefits that helped frontline employees balance work-life conflict. Limited paid time off and sick leave, consistent with the Maryland Health Working Families Act, were offered based on hours worked at all organizations. Participants also used flexible work schedules to help employees of all age groups plan for their lives outside of work accordingly. P2 stated, “if you are not flexible, it’s very hard to keep good workers here." P3 agreed by adding "some kids need to go to school, some parents need to get kids off the bus, and sometimes there are birthday parties or things you just can't miss." Both P2 and P3 scheduled around employee routine needs but also helped find coverage for open shifts or stepped in to help cover themselves to honor last minute requests. P1 scheduled 1 month at a time and releases the schedule weeks in advance. The onus was on the employee to find a replacement for a shift by posting the opening on an app that all employees use. P4 also used a shift exchange app, stating, "it's a win-win situation – we get shift coverage, folks get their time off, and someone else picks up extra bucks."

Perks. Perks, such as tuition assistance, can also enhance employee retention. P3 described an education partnership, which offers employees free GED services and discounted tuition with universities for advanced degrees. P3 reported, "some of my employees in the back have used this to get GED, which is an opportunity they never had before." P5 described how the organization offered "employees who work at least 25 hours free college-level online courses toward an associate, bachelor's, and all the way up to a master's degree." Similarly, P6 stated that the organization had "at least four or five employees actively taking advantage of tuition assistance." P6 further elaborated on the numerous scholarship opportunities that Org5 frontline employees enjoy, sharing that, "we had 27 winners who won between $1,000 and $2,500 last year toward school."

Both P1 and P6 noted that the additional perks offered by the organizations are not big recruiting factors but certainly provide a draw to retain talent. P5 stated, "Some of these guys are already here and they realize like, I think I'm actually kind of enjoying myself and this is doable. So we just keep sweetening the pot and then they want to stay for even longer." Employment at Org1, Org4, and Org5 was accompanied by affiliate discounts to gyms, fitness classes, and spas. P4 suggested that many employees reported at least trying "one or two discounts at one point or another, but the main draw is the food." All participants cited franchise food benefits, which included free meals each shift worked and discounted or free products, as a well-loved and frequently used perk of the frontline employees.

Reward and Recognition. Recognition conveys value and appreciation to the frontline employee. Three participants routinely used nonmonetary recognition programs to retain frontline employees. P2 gave core value pins every month to recognize the performance and contributions of one employee every month. P2 stated

> The winners wear the pins on their hats and the pride. Wow, and the smiles –it's real—it makes them want to do more good work to be seen. They are proud, and I've even heard them giving tips to each other on how to live our core values.

P3 used a team-decorated and team-maintained whiteboard to celebrate employees' good deeds. P3 noted "employees walk in and always check it out, and they say things like, 'thank you for noticing that,' or 'I didn't realize that meant so much to you.'" P5 similarly used an internal team Slack channel or team meetings to recognize employees who fulfill the franchise's goal of "winning the heart of Mount Airy and make a difference in someone's day." P5 suggested that such actions created fulfillment in his employees.

Growth Opportunity. Investing in skills or career development of frontline employees is another form of indirect compensation that participants provided to enhance retention. Participants offered skills development, such as cross-training or leadership development. P6 stated cross training employees from front to back of the house and giving employees “different opportunities to work in key positions around the business” not only provides “flexibility and scheduling benefits, but it also extends the life of the employee in our business.” Additionally, for some employees, P5 offered a Heart of Leadership class and access to a third-party platform, WildSparq, programs designed to hone competencies and character. P4 used leadership mentoring programs with other leaders in the franchise to shape employees for higher leadership roles. P4 discussed how mentoring dyads teach the “operational proficiencies and the leaderships traits necessary to advance and grow, not just here, but in life.”

Career development is another strategy to enhance employee retention. Every participant noted that individualizing an employee’s career ambitions was important. P1, P3, and P4 discussed how some form of career development was routinely discussed with employees at regular intervals. All three participants most frequently promoted employees to trainers or shift managers. P4 cited that when one employee is promoted “there’s this effect where other people close to that person realize they can do it too.” P3 suggested promoting “makes sense when you have quality people with experience—that’s who you want to have training new hires, and they make more per hour.” For frontline employees who are dedicated to continued growth through franchise leaders, Org2 and Org5 provide centralized training at franchise headquarters in a different state.

P2 suggested "the chance to travel, get paid for it, and grow your skills and become our own store manager and maybe franchise owner is a good chance."

Correlation to Existing Literature

Offering a competitive direct and indirect compensation package is a strategy that improves frontline employee retention. Competitive compensation attracts frontline employees to a fast-food organization (Tews et al., 2023). Once employed, competitive wages and benefits are associated with decreased employee turnover and increased employee loyalty (Han, 2022; Rishipal, 2019). Findings from my study are consistent with existing literature that suggests organizational factors, such as wage and benefits packages, improve employee retention.

Flexible scheduling is a benefit in the fast-food industry that positively impacts employee retention. Choper et al. (2022) suggested frontline workers were more likely to experience turnover when faced with unpredictable work scheduling practices, which included last-minute shift coverage or cancellations, or late communication of schedules. In the fast-food industry, flexible work arrangements include granting preferred hours, allowing part-time opportunities, and break management (Kim et al., 2023). Such work-life support policies likely offset burdens associated with working in the fast-food industry, increasing job satisfaction and positive work-life outcomes, which can increase employee retention (Kim et al., 2023; Liu-Lastres et al., 2023; Masterson et al., 2021). Findings from my study, which include flexible scheduling, honoring employee preferences, and shift exchange options, are consistent with existing literature in that work-life policies improve frontline employee retention.

Fast-food leaders who offer a variety of benefits may be more likely to retain frontline employees. Organizations in the fast-food industry that offer more perks beyond competitive wages are more likely to retain talent (Jolly et al., 2020). Benefits are significant to employees, yet the same benefits do not carry equal weight across generations, genders, races, or experiences in the field (Deale & Lee, 2023). For instance, millennial frontline employees are motivated by task significance, variety, and recognition (Seqhobane & Kokt, 2021). Findings from my study are consistent with existing literature as participants revealed various perks that resonated with some employees more than others, which were deemed necessary in employee retention efforts.

Theme 3: Leadership Characteristics

The third theme that emerged from the data was leadership characteristics. All six participants in the study discussed leadership as a meaningful way to reduce frontline employee turnover. The subthemes that emerged under leadership were open communication, perceived fairness, and servant leadership qualities.

Open Communication

Participants attributed open communication styles to increased employee retention. P2 stated

> I keep an open-door policy with employees. I want them to know I am here to help them solve their problems and they can come to me with whatever is on their mind. If they want to talk, I'm here to listen. It can be work or home problems, doesn't matter – I'm here and they know that.

P2 indicated this communication style allows frontline employees to feel comfortable asking questions for clarity in their roles, or “get the help they need before a problem arises and they think the solution is quitting.” P4 suggested regular check-ins with each frontline employee established the basis of trust, which led to open, two-way communication. P4 stated, “spending dedicated time helps me understand their needs and let’s each of my employees know they matter, and I show that by making our time sacred.” P3 also checked-in with frontline employees frequently. While check-ins are not at a routine cadence, P3 stated she “always make eye contact, remember people’s families, ask about what matters to them…it lets them know I value who they are, and they feel comfortable talking with me.”

Perceived Fairness and Accountability

Participants indicated providing equal treatment to all employees impacted employee retention. P5 stated

> We are slow to let people go. We like to give people chances to improve. But if there is no coaching that makes a difference, you have to protect the culture of peace too. You have to create those chains of accountability or you’ll have people stressing out the workplace, and we need other people who want to work here.

P1 similarly stated, “it’s about keeping people accountable and letting people see it…because you’re going to cost yourself your best workers if you don’t.” P1 noted that he “gives grace, of course, but it’s a business and there are no favorites, and the key is you explain why we do what we do, and word gets around, people understand, and they respect the why as well." Managers who create accountability and consistently enforce rules may be perceived as fair.

Servant Leadership Qualities

Servant leaders care for their followers and model the way for followers. P1 suggested authenticity and transparency was important for employee retention. P1 stated "being genuine with people, focusing on caring for them." P1 liked to demonstrate his empathy by "working shoulder to shoulder with them and being present on the busiest days and busiest shifts." P2 similarly worked at peak hours intentionally because he stated he "have the chance to interact with our customers and team the way we should – changing each other's lives for the better and setting the example." P5 also intentionally scheduled leaders to work at peak times to "model great relationships" for frontline employees. All individuals in leadership positions at Org5 were taught to "expect the best, accept responsibility, respond with courage, and think of others first" in their inactions with frontline employees.

Correlation to Existing Literature

Effective and open communication is well-explored in the literature as a potential strategy to increase employee retention. Managers can facilitate open communication through regular performance reviews, behaving authentically, and encouraging transparency (Ghani et al., 2022). Transparency is also related to employee-perceived fairness, which is crucial in retention, as employees who perceive unfair practices, favoritism, and organizational injustice are more likely to leave (Arici et al., 2019). Transparency and open communication can also increase an employee's perceived supervisor support. Frontline employees who perceive higher levels of their managers' support are more likely to experience job satisfaction and less likely to leave (Gordon et al., 2019). When frontline employees in the fast-food industry are satisfied with direct leadership, employees are more engaged, leading to increased loyalty to the organization and increased intention to stay (Book et al., 2019). The findings from this study are consistent with the literature, as participants reported open communication and fair treatment of all employees to be critical behaviors that support employee retention.

Consistent with these behaviors is servant leadership, which, in addition, focuses on the prioritization of employee needs. Servant leadership is associated with increased work engagement, which can lead to increased retention (Bavik, 2020). Within the industry, servant leadership is connected to increasing customer service in frontline employees by increasing passion for work (Ye et al., 2019). Servant leadership increases frontline employee well-being in high-stress service industries, which can lead to more personal growth and job satisfaction (Jimenez-Estevez et al., 2023). Findings from my study support the literature as participants empathized with and worked alongside frontline employees to increase retention.

Theme 4: Supportive and Fun Workplace Environment

The fourth theme that emerged from the data was a supportive and fun workplace environment. All six participants in the study discussed nurturing a positive workplace as a strategy to reduce frontline employee turnover. The subthemes that emerged under supportive and fun workplace environment were employee interest groups, workplace fun, and organizational culture.

Employee Interest Groups

Some participants cited employee interest groups as a method to create supportive peer relationships. P6 noted there were “communities within our community,” citing a small group of employees who had created an offsite English as a Second Language class for employees to gradually learn English. The language class, while financially covered by the franchise, was created by a former teacher and employee who P5 described as “a true community builder.” P2 also noted a large contingent of Spanish-speaking employees who came together regularly outside of work to practice and learn English. The informal class was voluntarily led by a peer frontline employee, but any required class materials were covered by the company. P2 described the effort as “a nice way for the employees to come together outside of work and do something for themselves with each other.” While P6 and P2 did not participate in the interest groups, both managers contributed financially and encouraged the employees to gather.

Workplace Fun

One aspect is to use friendly competition to motivate and create an atmosphere of fun. P5 noted

> Some young people get to working at other quick service restaurants and feel alone, so we really build community even just on shifts around the principle of “just have fun with it.” We hire people who like to win, and the thrill of victory is huge! We have scoreboards for drive-through and it shows our current record and the goal to beat for each of those hours.

P3 similarly suggested “there’s always laughing and joking on the line, but the most fun happens with challenges.” P3 held occasional challenges and contests around different topics, such as reducing waste or upselling orders, which she stated “gets everyone involved, sometimes working together and sometimes not, but definitely loving every minute!”

Other participants used team meals as a method to increase workplace fun. P2 noted staff routinely eat dinner together in groups on their shifts every day to increase the camaraderie between team members. P2 acknowledged “sometimes they want alone time, but most of the time, they like to eat, talk, laugh together and they come back ready to help each other.” Less routine were celebratory occasions, such as milestones and birthdays. P4 noted the team did “chants and a treat” to celebrate a team members work anniversaries. P5 likewise indicated how teams liked to have birthday cakes together to “create a sense of family.”

Organizational Culture

Participants noted that building organizational culture is an intentional, daily habit. P6 stated “we repeatedly hit our culture in all of our onboarding, training, and day-to-day with the employees.” P6 described how all training curriculum offered by the organization repeats the same core values, and how all leaders demonstrated these values intentionally even in the daily front- and back-of-the-house meetings. One example is the use of corporate catch phrases to unite people and create a sense of belonging. P5 described “the screaming and chanting in the back” as “a community builder!” Similarly, P4 held monthly staff meetings, stating “I take those opportunities to define what is important to our business – and that's the culture, the atmosphere we share together." The atmosphere P4 created was one of inclusivity and belonging, encouraging all employees to share pronouns or wear patches, reiterating many of the concepts he trains staff, which includes unconscious bias learning modules. Participants of Org4 and Org5 described the mission and values of the organization as critically important in shaping the way leaders treated frontline employees, and the impact it had on employees treating one another.

Correlation to Existing Literature

Fun work environments in the fast-food industry can have a positive impact on frontline employee well-being, which can lead to enhanced retention. Frontline employees are more likely to have positive feelings when working alongside coworkers and managers they can get along with (Michel et al., 2019). Employees may be less likely to leave their place of employment because of increased work engagement through workplace fun (Georganta & Montgomery, 2022; Tetteh et al., 2022). Fast-food leaders can use competitive activities and celebrations of personal and work-related milestones to promote positive workplace interactions and meaningful coworker relationships (Jyoti & Dimple, 2022; Mitchell et al., 2020). The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature as participants cited intentional, employee-centric activities to create an engaging and fun work environment to increase retention.

Employees are more likely to stay with an organization under coworker-supportive conditions. Current literature suggests retention may occur because of improved employee job satisfaction and enhanced social bonding, which may contribute to practical knowledge and skill transfer (Han, 2022). Employee bonding, which may result from coworkers celebrating and socializing, can reduce frontline employees' perceived stresses, such as work-family conflict and deep acting (Xu et al., 2020). Coworker support can increase frontline employee resilience and is associated with decreased turnover intention (Yang & Lee, 2023). The findings in this study are consistent with the literature, as participants nurtured fun and supportive work environments to increase frontline employee retention.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The four emergent themes of effective recruiting and onboarding strategies, competitive direct and indirect compensation, leadership characteristics, and supportive and fun workplace culture relate to the motivational aspect of the COR theory. Individuals will strive to achieve resource surpluses to protect themselves from potential stress, which leads to psychological well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals are willing to invest in resources to prevent or recover from resource loss or acquire resources (Hobfoll, 2001). P5 discussed the "long-term investment [he] makes in each employee." P4 stated, "Developing [employees] is all about giving control back to the employee." Leaders can take various actions to invest in employee resource reservoirs.

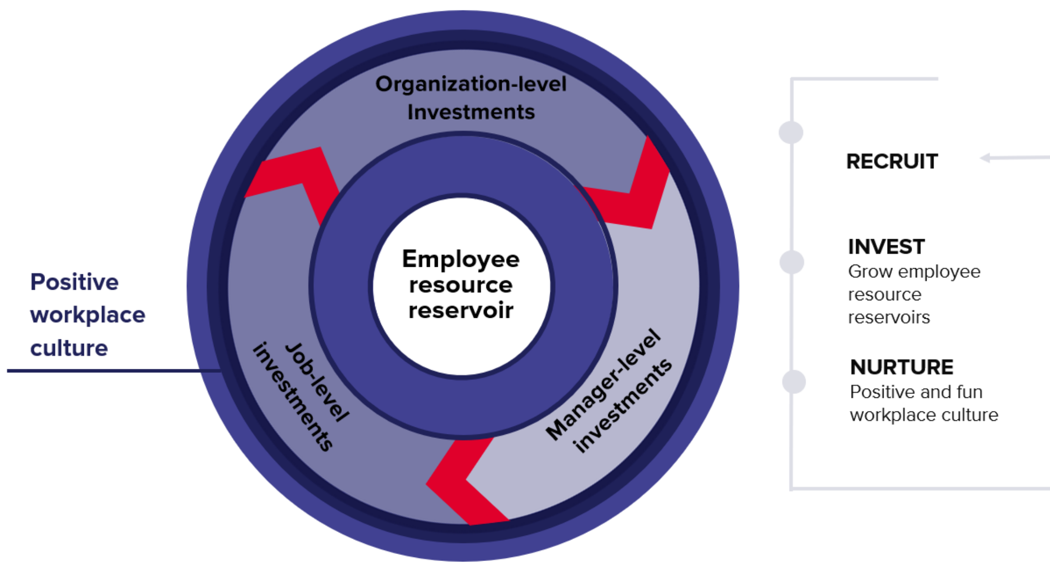
In a high-stress environment like the fast-food industry, leaders can invest in employee resource reservoirs through actions at the organization, job, and manager levels. At the organization level, leaders can provide competitive direct and indirect compensation, or Theme 2. Compensation, benefits, and perks are all energy resources that employees can use to obtain other resources (Hobfoll, 1989). At the job level, leaders can provide adequate onboarding and training, consistent with Theme 1. Job resources, such as skills and abilities, are acquired through practical training and may reduce the emotional exhaustion and frustration frontline employees confront in the first weeks of hire (Chen & Ye, 2023). Finally, managers can invest in employees at a manager level by displaying leadership characteristics, or Theme 3. Leadership characteristics that cultivate a sense of belonging and motivation can increase employees' psychological capital, a resource linked to well-being that can reduce turnover intention (Gom et al., 2021). Various aspects of Theme 2 also align with manager-level functions, such as the intentional recognition and rewarding of employees or the initiative required to offer growth potential and job enrichment to an employee by cultivating personal resources (Benitez et al., 2023). Organization, job, and manager-level investments contribute to employee resource reservoirs, which creates a resource-rich environment.

Creating a resource-rich environment is consistent with COR theory's resource caravans, or the aggregation of resources necessary to produce other resources, which can increase employee retention. Theme 4 of a supportive and fun workplace culture is an example of resource cultivation in a caravan (Salanova et al., 2010). Nurturing a positive workplace culture can buffer employees by developing contextual, personal resources, such as optimism, resilience, and self-efficacy (Hobfoll, 2018). The supportive culture described by participants in this study can also result from the numerous resource investments made at the organization, job, and manager levels.

In essence, a resource-rich environment results from leader actions. Consistent with the corollary of resource gain spirals, employees working in a resource-rich environment are more likely to experience resource gains. Intentional investment in employee resources can lead to thriving employees because of resource loss protection and meaningful resource gains, leading to overall well-being (Hobfoll, 2018). Such employees are not only more likely to stay with the organization. However, they are also active contributors to the workplace culture that some leaders use to recruit potential new hires (see Figure 1). Applicants inherently attracted to the workplace culture may be better fits for the organization and, thus, more likely to stay once hired.

Figure 1

Creating a Resource-Rich Environment



Note. Participant reported themes and subthemes can be grouped into organization-level, job-level, and manager-level investments, which grow employee resource reservoirs. These actions contribute to a positive workplace culture. The culture itself can be used as a recruiting strategy, which attracts better culture-fit applicants.

Applications to Professional Practice

Fast-food leaders need strategies to address frontline employee turnover. Employee turnover is an ongoing phenomenon that affects organizations' profitability because of the subsequent direct costs, such as recruitment, selection, and training of replacements, and indirect costs, which include work disruption and productivity loss (Lyons & Bandura, 2020). Each participant in this study has successfully reduced frontline employee retention within his or her tenure, and each participant used the following strategies: (a) effective recruiting and onboarding, (b) competitive direct and indirect compensation, (c) leadership characteristics, and (d) supportive and fun workplace culture. The findings from this study could provide fast-food leaders with the strategies needed to enhance the retention of frontline employees, thereby increasing organizational profitability.

The findings suggest that fast-food leaders can be pivotal in retaining frontline employees as early as the recruitment phase. The first strategy for fast-food leaders is to recruit effectively by relying on social media brand presence, referrals, and standardized interview processes. Because the fast-food industry has the highest quit rate compared to other industries, managers who wisely select employees who fit the organizational culture or who understand the work involved may be more likely to stay with the organization (Jolly et al., 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). As over half of the fast-food employees who voluntarily resign do so within the first 3 months, managers who provide onboarding programs or mentoring support may help new hires acclimate to the work demands and environment (Gallup, 2022; Goh & Okumus, 2020). Leader actions within the recruitment and onboarding phases establish a supportive culture for frontline employees.

Fast-food leaders also play a pivotal role in developing robust resource reservoirs in frontline employees beyond the initial onboarding phase. The second finding is that leaders can offer competitive direct and indirect compensation to frontline employees. Competitive wages, benefits packages, and perks are typical in the fast-food industry (Beckett, 2023). Leaders who also provide indirect compensation in the form of recognition or growth opportunity abilities can further develop employee knowledge and skills, which can positively affect employee job satisfaction and increase employee personal resources (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2023; Xie et al., 2023). Satisfied employees with deep resource reservoirs may be less likely to leave their employment and may contribute positively to the work environment.

The third and fourth findings are that fast-food leaders can use leadership characteristics and shape workplace culture to enhance frontline employee retention. Leaders who use open communication, accountability, fairness, and authenticity to support employees create safe and supportive working environments. These principles are often consistent with organizational mission and values, which fast-food leaders can intentionally incorporate into daily activities. Leaders can encourage employee socialization and interest groups and use gamification principles to increase workplace fun. Such strategies can bolster camaraderie among employees, leading to enhanced employee retention. As all participants in the study used an element of each theme in their frontline employee retention efforts, the findings suggest leaders should use a combination of all four identified strategies to enhance the retention of frontline employees in the fast-food industry.

Implications for Social Change

The results of this study may contribute to positive social change because providing frontline employees with necessary personal and job resources may increase retention. Employee retention improves employment stability, significantly impacting organizations, communities, and individuals. Fast-food organizations become more sustainable upon successfully retaining frontline employees by reducing the negative impact turnover has on profitability and long-term success (Coetzer et al., 2019). Successful fast-food restaurants can continue to retain and employ numerous employees, increasing economic stability while providing the community with necessary goods and services. Fast-food restaurants with high retention rates may also help local communities by attracting more applicants and minimizing the impacts of labor shortages or unemployment.

To enhance employee retention, fast-food managers can create resource-rich environments that facilitate the growth of employee resource reservoirs. As 63% of adults in the U.S. labor force report prior experience working in the restaurant industry, managers who intentionally nurture resource-rich environments positively influence many future workers of all industries (National Restaurant Association, 2022a). Skills, knowledge, and other resources buffer individuals from stress or are helpful in the acquisition of more individual resources, leading to employees with better emotional well-being. Employees may engage with others in their communities in positive ways.

Recommendations for Action

The strategies to enhance the retention of frontline workers identified in this qualitative multiple-case study could be valuable to U.S. fast-food leaders. Fast-food leaders must retain talent in an industry with higher employee turnover than any other (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Replacing frontline talent negatively impacts an organization's profitability, resulting in losses of half to 2 times every exiting worker's annual salary in recruiting, hiring, and training replacements and lost knowledge (Gallup, 2022). The findings from this study can help U.S. fast-food leaders enhance frontline employee retention. Fast-food leaders can consider implementing the following recommendations:

- Recruit effectively by using social media to establish company brand and culture, by trusting referrals, and by using talent management strategies during the interview process.
- Provide onboarding and structured training to prepare new hires and consider budding programs to develop mentorship and social connections.
- Offer competitive wages and benefits packages consistent with the industry, market, and local region of operation.
- Recognize and reward employees for service excellence and good deeds through core value awards, Slack channels, or team whiteboards.
- Invest in skills or career development of frontline employees through cross-training or leadership development, leading to promotions.

- Demonstrate a leadership style that cultivates accountability, open communication, authenticity, transparency, and empathy.
- Develop a supportive and fun workplace culture by encouraging interest groups, gamification, and socialization inside and outside of work.

By implementing the strategies identified in this study, fast-food leaders can avoid the detrimental effects of employee turnover and retain frontline talent. I plan to publish this study in ProQuest and other academic journals, thus allowing public access to the findings. Fast-food leaders should review the study's findings and consider implementing some of the recommendations to enhance frontline employee retention within their organizations.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies fast-food leaders use to enhance frontline employee retention. The limitations of my study could be overcome in future research into frontline employee retention strategies in the fast-food industry. One limitation of my study was geography, as I interviewed only six fast-food leaders in the capital region of Maryland. Future studies should include larger participant samples and include fast-food leaders in new areas, as Maryland may not represent the entire United States.

The findings of this study are grounds for additional studies. As I only interviewed fast-food leaders, future researchers could explore retention phenomena from the frontline employee's perspective. Researchers could also consider a quantitative or mixed methods methodology to examine retention in the fast-food industry. Future researchers could survey manager-employee dyads to examine the relationship between employee turnover intention and any of the variables uncovered in this study at the organization, job, and manager level.

Reflections

My strategic mindset grew in the doctoral program, and I directly applied what I learned through coursework and the research process to my job. I have become a better leader and a more confident decision-maker. During the doctoral study, I stepped outside my comfort zone, mainly in gaining access to participants. I rarely received emails, LinkedIn message responses, or callbacks to voice messages. I instead canvased and visited many fast-food establishments and spoke to many owners and operators hoping to sell my study. Even after gaining access, confirming participant eligibility and finding participants willing to take the time for the interview and member checking process was difficult. Yet, the data I collected and the themes that emerged were worthwhile. I have also applied retention strategies that emerged from my doctoral study to increase job and personal resource reservoirs in the teammates I manage.

The doctoral study process was challenging and exciting and pushed me outside of my comfort zone to foster intellectual, professional, and personal growth. I expected a challenge. Despite the struggles of excelling in a demanding career, homeschooling my fifth grader, and caring for aging parents, I reached the apex of my academic career within my predicted and desired time frame because of the unwavering support of my family and the expert guidance of my committee.

There was potential for preconceived personal biases to impact the study during data collection. I practiced reflexivity by regularly journaling self-examinations of biases and assumptions. Participant bias can also occur when attempting to respond in a way that the researcher would like, but I minimized this by asking probing follow-up questions and conducting member checking.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the effective strategies some fast-food leaders use to enhance frontline employee retention. To identify how fast-food leaders enhance frontline worker retention, I used a qualitative multiple case study approach. Six managers in the capital region of Maryland with direct knowledge and oversight of frontline workers participated in the study. The collected data included face-to-face semistructured interviews, field notes, and a review of relevant organizational documents. After data analysis, I identified four key themes (a) effective recruiting and onboarding strategies, (b) competitive direct and indirect compensation, (c) leadership characteristics, and (d) supportive and fun workplace culture. Viewed through the lens of the COR theory, each theme is an investment into resource reservoirs, growing the personal resources of frontline employees. A key recommendation for fast-food leaders is to invest in frontline employees by providing resources at the organizational, job, and manager levels and to nurture a supportive and fun workplace environment by implementing a combination of all four identified strategies. The implications for positive social change may include the economic and emotional benefits, such as increased satisfaction and reduced stress, to employees and their communities.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Introduce self and express gratitude for participation.
2. Provide an overview of the study: research question and purpose. Answer any questions the participant may have.
3. Explain interview process and provide information about member checking for interview reliability and validity.
4. Inform the interviewee he/she may withdraw from the research at any time.
5. Reassure the interviewee of confidentiality.
6. Review the informed consent and collect consent for participation and for audio recording of the interview for transcription and analysis. Provide a copy of the consent form to the participant.
7. Start audio recording.
8. Annotate date and time of the interview and identify participant with participant number. Begin the interview, which will not exceed 1 hour.
9. Ask the interview questions; follow-up with probing questions when necessary to obtain details.
10. Stop audio recording.
11. Express gratitude to the interviewee for participation and provide contact information for any questions or concerns.
12. Establish a future date for member checking.
13. After the interview, transcribe interview.
14. Summarize key points.

15. Share the key points with interviewee and ask for information verification.
16. Establish a follow-up meeting, in-person or virtual, for questions and comments, unless email is preferred.
17. Discuss data interpretation.
18. Revise as necessary and resend to interviewee for validation.