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Strategies Retailers Use to Build Brand Loyalty and Improve Customer Experience

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Mekus D. Samuel

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Strategies Retailers Use to Build Brand Loyalty and Improve Customer Experience

by

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MBA, American Intercontinental University, 2009

BBA, Andrews University, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

March 2018

Abstract

The use of strategy to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience by retail managers is essential in driving sales revenue and increasing profitability. Retail managers should perceive customer experience strategy as a tool for product differentiation, which could be leveraged to attain benefits, such as, repeat business, positive word of mouth, increased sales, and the competitive advantage. Some retail managers may not fully comprehend customer experience strategy, and may solely focus on individual facets such as, customer service and employee training. This qualitative multiple case study explored the strategies retail managers used to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. Olivier's confirmation- expectation theory was the conceptual framework for this study. Ten retail managers from Castries, St. Lucia, who performed their roles for a minimum of 4 years, were selected to participate in semistructured interviews using purposive sampling. Data was also collected from company documents, such as, merchandising policy, the company's website, and past campaign fliers. Three of the themes that arose from the thematic analysis of interview data and company documents were, building and sustaining brand loyalty, store image, and competitive advantage. Findings from this research may contribute to positive social change by providing retail managers a better understanding of customer experience and brand loyalty strategies as additional avenues to achieving operational results such as increased sales revenue, improved sales margins, and increased profitability. Local communities may experience increased employment opportunities, enhanced business activity, and increased tax receipts.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my deceased father, Rufus Kenneth Henry, for his steadfast guidance, support, and mentorship in helping me achieve this goal. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to the love of my life, Dr. Petra Alexander-Samuel for her encouragement and unrelenting support, my daughter Chloe Melladie Samuel and son Kyle D'mitri Dylan Samuel for their understanding and sacrifice, my mother, Sandra Olivia Samuel, and siblings Tranetta, Kaywana, Kerdus, Duranne, Abnaki, Veranjanie and Shakim for their obdurate support. I trust that this achievement will go a long way in inspiring those closest to me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The constant interaction between customers and brands is a stimulus for brand loyalty (Bilgili & Ozkul, 2015). According to Greve (2014) and Klaus (2014), to continually improve brand loyalty and drive sales revenue, retailers may develop more creative strategies for improving and managing customer experience to separate their businesses from those of their competitors. Retailers need to operate beyond providing superior goods and services to attain brand loyalty (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015). Evaluating and measuring the level of customer experience delivery is key to identifying all potential obstacles, which may adversely affect customer experience delivery and encourage repeat sales. Verhoef and Lemon (2013) asserted that 72% of retail organizations listed repeat business as a top priority. Businesses must compete on a high scale requiring satisfactory customer experience throughout the entire purchasing period and managing customer expectations before, during, and after the sale (Klaus, 2014). Acquiring genuine brand loyalty may produce a strong business image in the retail world and could create avenues for retaining current customers and attracting new customers.

Background of the Problem

Retail managers acquire important information about their customers' tastes and preferences through daily interactions with customers. According to Chiang (2013), traditional profit strategies were designed with a focus solely on customer preferences and patterns. Customer relationship management (CRM) has been a method for achieving maximum profits by disseminating and analyzing information about customers. However, 50% to 70% of CRM do not meet the desired objectives (Chiang, 2013). More modern

strategies focus on the dynamics of customer interactions with the business and not just preferences and patterns (Shilpa & Rajnish, 2013). By emphasizing customer experience, businesses can achieve their strategic objectives, build brand loyalty, and improve market share (Grossart & Greenshaw, 2014). This could add significant value to the organization and optimize positive contributions to the overall customer experience, without negating what customers want.

Strategies focusing on customer experience result in the alteration of customer behavior, as retail managers gather information about the customers' environment (Shilpa & Rajnish, 2013). The customer's needs are aligned with the business' capacity to satisfy those immediate and general needs (Bilgili & Ozkul, 2015). The ability of retail managers to establish trustworthy relationships with customers is a critical aspect in building brand loyalty and sustaining profitability (Klaus, 2014; Sachdeva & Goel, 2015).

Problem Statement

Approximately 80% of retail customers switch their loyalty because of poor customer experience (Nagengast, Evanschitzky, Blut, & Rudolph, 2014). In a survey of 362 cross-industrial companies, Johnston and Kong (2011) found that although 80% of organizational leaders perceived a positive customer experience was delivered, only 8% of customers thought they had a positive customer experience. The general business problem is some retail managers experience loss of revenue because of poor customer experience strategies, which drive customers to other retail establishments. The specific business problem is retail managers lack strategies for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies retail managers use for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. The target population included retail managers from two businesses from the city of Castries, St. Lucia. The study may contribute to positive social change by providing retail managers in St. Lucia a broader understanding of strategies they may use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. Retail establishments in the community may gain creative retail strategies from the study results. The fulfillment of these strategies may enhance customer experience and repeat business, increase profitability, build brand loyalty, drive business expansion and employment, foster economic growth, increase tax revenues and strengthen the local economy.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative research method involves studying participants in their current environment (Lebor, 2015), and is applicable to business settings (Elo et al., 2014; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Mahoney & Vanderpoel, 2015). The quantitative research method examines numerical trends and test hypotheses (Lunde, Heggen, & Strand, 2013; McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015; Wester, Borders, Boul, & Horton, 2013). The mixed-methods research involves the use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches to analyze data (Farquhar et al., 2013; Kachouie & Sedighadeli, 2015; Yin, 2016).

This research involves studying retail managers in their natural setting, and not to obtain findings through the analysis of statistical and numerical data. The quantitative

research method was not appropriate. I did not use the mixed-methods because its quantitative feature was beyond the scope of this research study. The qualitative research method involves studying participants in their natural environment, including business settings (Lebor, 2015). I used the qualitative research method for this study.

Ethnographic research design focuses on culture and requires researchers to spend time within specific cultural settings (Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Yin, 2014). Ethnographic research design was not suitable for this study. Phenomenology focuses on current phenomena and involves the study of personal events (Chan et al., 2013; Sloan & Bowe, 2013; Yin, 2013). Phenomenology was not appropriate for this study. The narrative research design centers on the life of an individual (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Von Contzen & Alders, 2015; Yin, 2016). I did not use the narrative research design. The exploratory multiple case study research design was the most appropriate way to study individuals in their natural environment and answer how and why questions (Tetnowski, 2015; Yin, 2014). I used the exploratory multiple case study research design for the purposes of this research study.

Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was, What strategies do retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience in your organization?

Interview Questions

To answer my research question, I asked the following questions to participants:

1. What strategies are you using for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience?
2. How effective are these strategies at improving customer experience and building brand loyalty?
3. How do you use these strategies to gain the competitive advantage?
4. How do you measure the success of the strategies that you implement?
5. What are some of the customer experience training programs you use to improve employee skills?
6. How effective are your customer experience training programs at building brand loyalty?
7. What other information can you give to improve customer experience and build brand loyalty?

Conceptual Framework

At the core of this qualitative case study was the expectation-confirmation theory (ECT) by Olivier in 1977 (as cited in Oghuma et al., 2016). ECT focuses on the expectations of customers to determine whether their customer experience needs were satisfied or not (Klaus, 2014). The perceptible value that individual customers attach to the functional and emotional interaction with a company, constitutes the nucleus of the ECT (Oghuma et al., 2016). Lee, Lee and Lee (2015) used ECT to explore customer expectations, customer experience, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in drug marketing. Oghuma et al., (2016) used ECT to determine the nexus between perceived service quality and brand loyalty of message instant mobile customers. ECT was

applicable to this study because customers' evaluation and expectations are key determinants in formulating, implementing and evaluating customer experience strategies to build brand loyalty.

The customer's expectations of a company at different customer service and customer experience points are useful in formulating future strategies and evaluating present ones (Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015). The customer experience strategies retail managers implement must aim to lessen or remove any gaps between what customers expect, and the actual level of experience or service that is delivered. Satisfied customers become loyal customers, and this is the ultimate objective of retail managers in building a successful business (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015).

Operational Definitions

Following are definitions of terms I used in this study:

Brand equity: Brand equity is the perceived value of the brand (Buil, Martínez, & de Chernatony, 2013).

Brand loyalty: Customers' measurable and tangible commitment to a brand (Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015).

Competitive advantage: Competitive advantage is a unique service or product provided by an organization (Herrera, 2015).

Customer experience: A concept which involves fulfilling customer expectations and needs beyond the traditional service function (Klaus, 2014).

Customer loyalty: Customer loyalty is the attainment of a customer's patronage because of continued positive customer experiences (Klaus, 2014; Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015).

Customer satisfaction: Customer satisfaction refers to the principle of adequately aligning all aspects of a customer's experience with the customer's expectations (Simon & Gomez, 2013).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are refutable facts that are present in a research study (Roy & Pacuit, 2013). Two assumptions arose from conducting this proposed study. The first assumption was that participants will answer the open-ended interview questions honestly and on time. Secondly, retail managers had a high degree of comprehension and knowledge of customer experience and the concept of brand loyalty.

Limitations

Limitations are irrepressible threats that comprise the internal validity of a research study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The first limitation was conducting the research with a limited size of 10 leaders. Another limitation was that research participants could withdraw from the study at any time of the research process.

Delimitations

Delimitations are limits or restrictions the researcher institutes in the study (Bhat, Gijo, & Jnanesh, 2014; Batongbacal, 2015; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Rodner, 2015). This study had three delimitations. The first delimitation was the location of the study,

Castries, St. Lucia. The scope of this research study did not transcend multiple geographic locations. The second delimitation was that only 10 retail managers with at least 4 years of experience at the managerial level would participate in this proposed study. The third delimitation was that I studied only two companies in this multiple case study research.

Significance of the Study

This study could be of value to businesses because the results may highlight benefits that retail managers could obtain by focusing on improving customer experience and building brand loyalty. Researchers indicated that retail managers who focus on improving customer experience and building brand loyalty enjoy tangible benefits such as increased sales revenue, enhanced brand equity, and improved profitability (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

Contribution to Business Practice

This qualitative multiple case study may contribute to business practice by exploring strategies for improving customer experience and building brand loyalty. Customer experience is essential for success because it impacts all areas of the business (Klaus, 2014). Improving customer experience might provide business owners with strategies to build customer loyalty, improve productivity, increase repeat business, and reduce operating costs (Klaus, 2014). Creating positive customer experiences might allow business owners an opportunity to differentiate their business from those of competitors (MacGillavry & Wilson, 2014).

Implications for Social Change

This study might contribute to social change by providing retail managers a more profound understanding of strategies for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience (Klaus, 2014). The establishment of trustworthy relationships means that retail managers, customers, and other stakeholders might be motivated to pool their resources and work on social enhancement projects, events, and causes. Retail managers might also be better positioned to expand their business operations, which might mean recruitment of additional employees, more donations to charity, increased sponsorship of community and sporting events, and so on.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies retailers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience in the retail industry in St. Lucia. The overarching research question for this study was, What strategies do retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience in Castries, St. Lucia? In this literature review, I explored various customer experience strategies that may help build brand loyalty.

I begin the literature review with an overview of ECT, followed by the customer satisfaction concept, customer experience, CEM, CRM, and store image. The literature review includes customer experience as it relates to brand loyalty, and competitive advantage. It also includes discussion on customer experience strategies, and measuring customer expectations.

Information from the following databases and libraries were used to develop this research study: Walden University Library, research databases such as ABI/INFORM, ProQuest, Complete and Business Source Complete, and peer-reviewed journals. In addition to its focus on ECT, the review covered topics found through the following keywords searches: *customer experience, customer service, customer satisfaction, retail, customer satisfaction, customer retention, building brand loyalty, and improving customer experience*. This literature review consists of 175 journal articles, 19 books, and 14 dissertations organized by topics specifically surrounding customer experience strategies and building brand loyalty. Of the 208 references, 198 (95%) were peer-reviewed publications between 2013 and 2017 and, within 5 years from the expected approval of the final study.

Expectation-confirmation Theory

According to Joo and Choi (2016), ECT involves the customer's intention to repurchase or discontinue use of a product or service, customer satisfaction, customer experience and brand loyalty. ECT encompasses predicting the customer's behavior towards the continuance of repurchasing a product of service (Hsiao, 2016). At the first phase of the ECT framework, the customer demonstrates preconceptions of a product or service before conducting a purchase (Joo & Choi, 2016). After the use of the product or service, the customer assesses the performance of the product or service. The customer then performs a comparison between the initial expectation of the product or service and their perception on the performance, to confirm their initial presumption towards the product or service (Joo & Choi). After which the customer determines whether the

product or service meets their satisfaction and formulates a repurchase intention or a discontinue decision (Joo & Choi, 2016). The ECT confirmation is influenced by customer expectation and perceived performance, whilst, customer satisfaction is influenced by customer expectation and confirmation (Atapattu, Sedera, Ravichandran, & Grover, 2016). Customer expectation may be influenced by several factors, including, radio advertising, website promotions and other viable marketing strategies. The critical analyses attached to customer expectation help customers determine whether a product meets their satisfaction or not. The results of this assessment drive customers' behavior in making a purchasing decision.

According to Hsiao (2016), customer expectation is a fundamental element of customer satisfaction. Customers' preconceived perceptions about how products or services align with their needs are what they use to assess their actual customer experience. The higher the bar of customer expectation, the greater the customer satisfaction, and the lower the bar of customer expectation, the lower the customer satisfaction (Hsiao, 2016; Joo & Choi, 2016). In the ECT model customer expectation and customer satisfaction cannot be mutually exclusive. Customer satisfaction is only achieved when the customer expectation is fully met (Atapattu et al., 2016).

Some scholars argue that the ECT model does not adequately account for the post purchase element of a customer's shopping experience (Hsieh, Lai, Ma, Alexander, & Lin, 2016). Hsieh, Lai, Ma, Alexander, and Lin contended that ECT places intense focus on customer expectation within the context of the direct experience. Other scholars purported that preconceived perceptions of customer expectation might be rooted in

negative word of mouth, in negative competitor advertising, and not in the customer's personal experience with the business (Takahashi, 2016; Wali & Nwokah, 2016). Within the context of the retail establishment, for example, a customer may have lowered expectations of customer service because of negative press; however, their shopping experience may differ upon visiting the store.

A very salient point of discontent amongst some scholars is their portrayal of customer satisfaction (Jayakanth & Adalarasu, 2016; La & Yi, 2015). Several scholars argued that customer satisfaction is sensorial and attitudinal (Joo & Choi, 2016; Lee & Park, 2014; Makanyeza, Macheyo, & Du Toit, 2015; Nurcahyo, 2016), whilst others argue that customer satisfaction cannot be the attitude on varying plains because of the innate prognostic variability (Chang-Juck & Kim, 2013; Khalaf, 2013; Simon & Gomez, 2013). Other scholars posited that preconceived perceptions form the tenet of customer expectation, and this attitudinal response is emotional (Lin, Hsu & Chen, 2015; Oghuma et al., 2016). The scholars contended that this response is vastly different from customer satisfaction because customer satisfaction is an assessment of a customer's emotions, and not the actual shopping experience (Lin et al., 2015; Oghuma et al., 2016). For example, a customer may have an excellent experience with a recently purchased electronic device, but feel displeased because some added features fell short of their expectation.

Customer Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction occurs when a product or service meets specific customer expectations (Neupane, 2015). An example of customer satisfaction in the retail industry is when a customer goes out to purchase specific products, encounters pleasant

employees, affordable prices, and product quality that aligns with what he or she expects (Czarniewski, 2014). Customers' preconceived perceptions of a good or service may be confirmed or dispelled by their actual experience (Hsieh et al., 2016). When customer satisfaction is attained, the propensity for repeat business and customer loyalty will improve (Porral & Levy-Mangin, 2014). A loyal customer is a dedicated customer and this patronage is what successful businesses build their foundation upon.

The measurement of success for any organization is its customer base (Klaus, 2014). An understanding of what customers expect is fundamental in planning customer experience and customer satisfaction strategies. The organizational leaders' ability to formulate and implement strategies to satisfy existing customers and to acquire new ones, will ultimately determine the organization's level of financial success (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). Customers want to fulfill their shopping needs and they want to achieve that in the least complicated manner. When customers are satisfied with a product or service, they communicate that to other people. This word of mouth is integral in growing market share and expanding the business (Czarniewski, 2014). Dissatisfied or disgruntled customers will also relay their perceived bad experiences with other customers and potential customers through negative word of mouth (Czarniewski). Negative word of mouth can be detrimental to a company's reputation, profitability, and existence.

Retail managers must formulate, implement, and consistently evaluate customer experience strategies to ensure alignment with customer expectations. The adverse ripple effect of negative word of mouth not only impacts the company directly, but also affords its competitors opportunities to captivate and retain new customers (Klaus, 2014). With

the circulation of positive comments from customers, organizations can achieve more sales and success. Retail managers must understand the impact of negative word of mouth on the organization to recognize the touchpoints that contribute to business failure. This will foster comprehensive improvement, strengthen brand presence, develop customer relationships, and enhance customer experience.

Customer Experience

The concept of customer experience refers to what consumers want to buy, where they want to buy, when they want to buy, and how they would like to buy (Rousseau, 2015). Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) are credited with the conception of customer experience and described the concept as broad, emotional, and sensorial. They viewed customer experience as beyond the point of sale, and as a holistic and subjective concept. Success in the retail industry has become less about what is being offered for sale and more about how that product or service is being sold. This is the relatively new experiential paradigm shift in shopping (Sachdeva & Goel, 2015). The concept of customer experience involves understanding and customizing strategy to account for the variability that exists among customers' buying decisions (Klaus & Maklan, 2013; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Modern professionals and service scientists weighed the implementation of customer experience as a potential tool in attaining competitive advantage (Ul Hassan & Rehman, 2016; Yague & Romero, 2016). Rousseau (2015) asserted that a successful experience occurs when customers get something exceptional, indelible, and consistent. Customers are more likely to return and refer other customers to the place where the memorable experience met their expectation. Other scholars have

contended that customer experience is the customers' emotional, social, cognitive, affective, and physical responses to the providers of goods and services (Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015; Young-Joong, 2015) whereas, Rousseau (2015) purported the extent to which customers perceive and relate to their shopping environment will either positively or negatively influence customer experience. One constant among these schools of thought is that if customers have a positive experience within a shopping environment, they will be more likely to shop there again (Rawson, Duncan, & Jones, 2013). Additionally, customer experience is an intricately personal event because it connotes customers' involvement at various levels (Nasermoadeli, Ling & Maghnati, 2013).

Scholars and researchers have posited that the concept of customer experience contains two different and distinct categories: consumer and organizational perspectives (Kranzbuhler et al., 2017). The consumer perspective is when consumers perceive customer experience as being favorable to them, and not necessarily favorable to the organization. Within the context of a retail environment, for example, customers may get an opportunity to purchase deeply discounted merchandise because of close-dated items. The organizational perspective of customer experience is perceived by the customer as favorable to the organization, and not necessarily favorable to the customer (Kranzbuhler et al.). A nexus between the two perspectives must be attained to ensure customer experience strategy is successful (Kranzbuhler et al., 2017). Organizational perspective customer experiences are perceived as static, whilst consumer perspective customer experiences are perceived as dynamic (Andajani, Hadiwidjojo, Rahayu & Djumahir,

2015). A retail store, for example, can attempt to enhance the aesthetic element of its customer experience by installing new fixtures and fittings, aggressive remerchandising, and so on. However, there is no guarantee that this will have a positive impact on existing or prospective customers. The inherent dynamism in customer perspective, customer experience is found when customers use all their interactions, functional and emotional, to assess their perception of customer experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). This is highly subjective and intimate, and the organization has little to no influence in that personal space.

Customer experience is fundamentally grounded upon behavioral and relational value, rather than on just being purely functional (Rousseau, 2015). Customer experience has evolved as a pivotal factor in successful organizations because of the impact it has on all the aspects of a business (Bevan, 2014). Organizations actively engage multiple processes to proactively cater for the distinctive dynamism in customer activity: (a) conduct customer satisfaction surveys, (b) monitor complaints or service calls, (c) scrutinize social media behavior, and (d) perform market research and applicability. These data are then analyzed using historical customer behavior and current trends to effectively predict future behavior (Cundari, 2015). Customers do not just want to have a great shopping experience; they want to feel valued and special. Customer experience originates from relationships between customers and a product/service, an organization, or employees (Courage, 2015). This relationship is inherently personal and grounded in sensorial, social and emotional preconceptions and experiences (Chahal & Dutta, 2014). Retail managers need to identify and fully understand the customer's trip to the

establishment from beginning to end, focusing on the customer's experience, via a customer centric lens. This could enable retail managers to cultivate a relationship and connect with customers throughout their journey (Klaus, 2014). Such initiatives could drive more foot traffic and increase business.

The emotional facet of customer experience is reflective of the moods and emotions of customers whilst shopping. Customers' emotional experience can be wide ranging, from minor positive or negative expressions to outward expressions of joy and happiness (Klaus, 2014; Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Happiness and joy may stem from the receipt of a particular brand of product that a customer is familiar with or dissatisfaction from a favorite product being out of stock. The emotional side of customer experience offers retail managers a real-time window into how customers feel about certain elements of their shopping trip. Positive emotional sentiments are aligned with repeat business and brand loyalty, whereas customers who express negative emotional sentiments may tend to turn away and be patrons elsewhere (Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015).

Social experience refers to the relationships and interactions formulated with others within society and customers form a central part of the communities in which retailers serve (Kaul & Srivastava, 2014). Interactions within the peer group allow individuals to obtain practical experience in formulating social connections and an aura of commonality (Rousseau, 2015). These consumer interactions can impact other consumers directly or indirectly (Rousseau). Direct interactions relate to employees who work at retail stores who have friends and family, some of whom may have attended the same school, church, and/or worked together elsewhere. Indirect interaction, on the other

hand, refers to customer observations of attitudes, mannerisms of other customers, and company employees (Andajani et al., 2015). The perception of whether these observations are positive or negative will most likely dictate future consumer behavior and overall customer experience (Andajani et al.). The social impacts have the power to influence customers' buying decisions and the extent of their brand loyalty. Customers want to shop in an environment in which they feel comfortable (Ul Hassan & Rehman, 2016). Delivering value that will shape the perception of customers is essential for increasing customer satisfaction levels. A view into the customers' world could assist retail managers understand customers' needs in leveraging competent employees to address the needs of customers. With increased employee-customer interaction, management engagement, and refinement of new approaches, retail managers could cultivate a culture that provides leading customer experiences.

The sensory experience involves customers' perceptions of the aesthetic and sensorial elements of a shopping experience (Chahal & Dutta, 2014). Retail managers must concentrate on connecting with customers on an emotional and behavioral level. Organizational websites, social media interactions, and in-store activities should strive for emotional appeal, as well as foster customer feedback. For example, retail stores must consistently offer new and exciting products, erect captivating seasonal merchandising displays, and ask customers to rate their experience through surveys. Customer experience encompasses more than just the functional appeal of customer service; it involves connecting with shoppers on an emotional, sensorial, and psychological plain (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). As such, customers have grown less interested in what stores

should sell and more in how they go about selling it (Chahal & Dutta, 2014). This is where customers make spontaneous decisions on elements such as company standards, competitor standards, and brand loyalty. This highly personal experience will then position the customer to formulate critical conclusions about the products and services being offered, shopping environment, and overall shopping experience (Yahklef, 2015).

Customer Experience Management (CEM)

CEM refers to viewing the organization as a synergistic whole from the customer's viewpoint and is the process that organizational leaders employ to efficiently manage customers' points of interface with the company (Duplessis & DeVries, 2016). CEM focuses on every facet of the company's operations; from its website to its customer service department. Every subset of the organization must focus on delivering the ultimate customer experience and fulfilling customer satisfaction (Duplessis & DeVries). In a retail establishment, insiders might view the meat and produce department and the front end of a retail establishment as distinct operational subsets, customers do not perceive it that way. When customers have a bad experience with one department, they do not perceive this negative experience in isolation, but go on to formulate a negative perception about the entire organization (Arineli, 2016). CEM suggests customers formulate profound perceptions over time through interactions with an organization and by what they hear from other customers (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

The goal of CEM is to take full advantage of customer interactions by viewing these interactions from the customer's standpoint. After retail managers have effectively done so, the customer experience strategies that they implement, through CEM, will be

more closely aligned to customer expectations (Klaus, 2014). Every occasion that a customer and a company interact is an opportunity for the company to learn something new about that customer. CEM, a broad concept that goes way beyond the functional service encounter of customer service, considers before and after service encounters as well as the functional elements of service quality (Yahklef, 2015). In a CEM survey, Klaus (2014) found that managers agreed that delivering optimum levels of customer experience serves to reinforce a company's brand by transcending core values across all service encounters. The managers also concurred that high levels of customer experience increase loyalty to specific brands and offered increased avenues for repeat business.

CEM demands a different view of the business and its assets. Within the principles of CEM is the company's cognizance of creating positive experiences for its employees, which will then similarly translate into enhanced proficiency and the creation of positive experience for customers (Arineli, 2016). The formulation and execution of CEM places companies in a unique position to decide upon the desired parameters for customer experiences and to tailor appropriate strategy to deliver these desirables (Mili et al., 2016). CEM involves the empowerment of everyone including employees on the operational front, to go out and follow through fully with agreed strategies which enhance customer experience. Additionally, CEM is more than being pleasant to employees and customers; it refers to optimizing revenue opportunities per customer, streamlining operational costs, and identifying new avenues for growth and expansion (Arineli, 2016; Klaus, 2014). Organizations that manage the experience of customers grow faster and are more profitable.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

CRM involves processes that an organization implement to attain the company's goals and maximize profitability from existing customers. This company-centric attribute is the biggest shortfall of the CRM principle (Opara, 2016). CRM centers on retaining customers by collecting information from interactions through social media, e-mail, internet and phone. Relationships are built with existing customers, and new strategies are engineered to maximize sales and profitability (Ramaj & Ismaili, 2015).

Building customer relationships take time and require targeted efforts. The emergence and widespread use of technology to track trends, determine niche markets is essential in establishing successful CRM strategy. The use of customer databases, electronic mail, and social media, means that companies have a direct, and permissible link to specific customer segments (Ramaj & Ismaili, 2015). Modern day customers place high value on familiarity and repetition. Customers want what they want and know, and they want it now. With the use of technology, organizations can now hone in on customers' tastes and preferences to optimize repeat sales and improve profitability (Peppers & Rogers, 2016). CRM affords companies a unique opportunity to measure the value that customers bring to their operations. The use of loyalty cards, tracks frequency of customer purchases, types of customer purchases and basket size (monetary value) of these purchases. This means that companies can design intentional and targeted CRM strategy to continually maximize this customized relationship. Return on customer (ROC) or the measure of how efficient the company uses resources to extract value from

customers is of paramount importance for evaluating current CRM strategies and determining CEM strategies that are aligned with the business (Peppers & Rogers, 2016).

Both CEM and CRM continue to evolve as far as the delivery of ultimate customer experience and optimization of profitability. The former emerged because of a strategic shift from focusing primarily on the attainment of maximizing revenue and profit as in the case of CRM, to the consistent delivery of positive customer experiences.

In large measure, CEM surfaced because of this short-coming contained within the CRM

(Arineli, 2016). CRM focuses on maximizing revenue from existing customers, whilst CEM is focused on the depth of the relationship and the treatment of the customer as a journey and not as destination (Mili et al., 2016). Both CRM and CEM are significant and complementary to each other. When an organization correctly implements CRM, with all resources fully adaptable, this augurs well in enhancing its customer-centric elements, which is fundamental to CRM. After this occurs, the organization will now be expediently poised to deliver positive customer experiences, offer differentiation and build brand loyalty (Mac Gillavry & Wilson, 2014).

Store Image and Customer Experience

Retail managers use unique tactics to appeal to the sensory facets of the customers by implementing captivating merchandising displays, fostering the highest standards of store cleanliness, promulgating product differentiation, and maintaining ambience and aesthetics (Nasermoadeli, Ling, & Maghnatil, 2013). Some scholars purported that store image, which refers to, aesthetics, quality of products/services, ambience, convenience,

pricing, and so on, is an integral strategy that retailers explore to connect with customers and to enhance customer experience (Hosseini, Jayashree & Malarvizhi, 2014). The concept of store image was introduced in the 1950s and describes the perceptions of customers regarding how a store operates functionally and psychologically (Dhurup, Mafini & Mathaba, 2013). Today, store image is one of the most significant factors of a retail store's survival and growth (Grah & Tominc, 2015). A 2015 study conducted to determine the effects of pharmacy store image on customer loyalty and satisfaction in South Korea, found that store image had a positive impact on both customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2015).

Store atmospherics. Store atmospherics refers to the art of setting up a store to enhance its sensory value and customer experience to customers (Hosseini et al., 2014).

Store atmospherics has an impact on customers' perception and on customer loyalty. Because of this impact, along with the paradigm shift to embrace customer experience, the role of store atmospherics is now more significant. Measuring atmospherics' effect on the sensory elements as a strategy to enhance customer experience is particularly salient (Spence, Puccinelli, Grewal, & Roggeveen, 2014). Store atmospherics significantly enhances the aesthetic elements of a store's setting and connects with customers on a deep sensory level (Marques & Santos, 2012). Even the scent which emanates from inside a retail store has an impact on customers. Pleasant aromas arouse curiosity and appeal to customers on an intimate sensory plain (Hosseini et al., 2014; Orth & Sharma & Rather, 2015). Several researchers have concurred that ambience and design are key elements of store atmospherics and have a significant effect

on customer experience and consumer perception (Grah & Tominc, 2015; Hosseini et al., 2014; Sharma & Rather, 2015). Customers want to feel good and comfortable in the stores that they choose to patronize. Store settings are being reprofiled to appeal and connect with customers on an emotional, sensory and multisensory level (Spence et al., 2014). Recent research in customer experience and touchpoint elements endorse the idea of offering multiple touch points as a strategy for uniquely connecting with customers, in an increasingly competitive environment (Dahl, 2016; Stein & Ramaseshan, 2016).

Pricing. Pricing forms an integral element of customers' perception and their overall customer experience. The price customers are willing to pay for a product or service connotes their perceptive value of that product or service (Gupta, 2014). Van Scheers (2016) asserted that price is the monetary value tagged to a specific product or service. Some researchers posited that the most suitable price that customers pay for a product or service should be determined by customers (Esaki, 2013; Gupta, 2014; Van Scheers, 2016). Moreover, two antecedents of customer satisfaction, fairness and honesty, are crucial in effectively aligning price with perception (Porral & Levy-Mangin, 2014). In a study conducted in the Indian city of Jammu, Gupta (2014) determined the nexus between price sensitivity and customer satisfaction. Of the 282 customers from an interview, more than 55% of them concurred that pricing has an impact on perception or satisfaction.

The image of a store affords an exclusive opportunity to attain differentiation and to promulgate its own customer experience (Nasermoadeli, Ling, & Maghnatil, 2013). For some customers, quality of merchandise, ambience, and service staff formulate the

main areas of store image (Dhurup et al., 2013; Spence, et al., 2014), whilst for others, this experience hinges solely on perceived prominence (Pritchett, 2014). Lu (2014) purported that patronage and purchase intentions have been found to be more highly correlated with customers' perceptions about store image more than product quality, pricing, or variety. The functional attributes of the store include location, price, products, convenience, and so on, whereas its psychological attributes include luxury and convenience (Chahal & Dutta, 2014; Dhurup et al., 2013). Customers associate their feelings and perceptions with a store's image and this influences their repurchase behavior (Erdil, 2015). Store image strategies must reflect the corporate culture and their success is contingent on how effective they are at optimizing customer experience at the operational level (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2015).

Service. Service involves the interaction of customers and employees (Fisk, 2015). Customers' approval of the quality of service received, may directly impact an organization's profit earning capacity and even, its existence (Prentice, 2013). This interaction is an integral component of the brand image and companies are increasingly relying on employees to deliver quality service to increase sales and be profitable (Wong, Liu & Tjosvold, 2015). Service quality refers to observations or perceptions of customers regarding the delivery of customer service (including its many components like quality, convenience, awareness, professionalism, interaction with sales floor personnel), in comparison to their expectations (Ahmed et al., 2014). Because of this inherent variability in perception of great or excellent service, retail managers must strive to maintain the highest levels of service. Fisk (2015) described great service as being

human, remembering customers, and how they enjoy the organization's product or service. Cho, Kim and Kim (2015) purported that good service encourages word of mouth and referrals, which in turn fosters customer loyalty and patronage. The image of a store is improved through great service by employees. If employees are courteous, pleasant, and helpful, the outcome will be a positive customer perception and customer experience, and repeat business (Gupta, 2014). Customer service is also an avenue for the customers to relate views on the products, service, prices, and ambience to customers (Klaus, 2014). This feedback from customers is crucial in determining appropriate customer experience strategies and tactics. Organizations must be proactive in implementing changes that reflect customer feedback to enhance the customer journey.

Customer Experience and Brand Loyalty

The success of retail stores is contingent on customers' response to the products and services they offer. If customers respond positively, then key operational indicators such as sales volume, profitability, inventory turnover will trend positively; and if customers respond negatively, these operational indicators will respond negatively (Gupta, 2014). Customers who respond positively to a customer service or customer experience encounter, will most likely be repeat shoppers and offer positive word of mouth about that experience (Klaus, 2014). An increase in operational, tactical, and strategic costs propel retail managers to formulate prudent and proactive approaches to successfully navigate this competitive and dynamic industry. Historically, retail managers attained brand loyalty through strategic store locations, enhanced customer service, and wide assortment of goods and services (Alhouti al., 2015). However, in the face of

mounting competition from department stores, discount stores, and online stores, retailers need to innovate or risk vegetating. Stores are now larger, more technologically advanced, and carry a wider variety of goods and services, than before (Kitapci et al., 2013).

Retailers offer customer experience through one-stop shopping, improvement in ambience and store aesthetics, and accessibility (Sreenivasulu et al., 2014). There must be intentional and methodical attention given to the strategies for building and sustaining customer experience (Sachedva & Goel, 2015). For example, within a retail store setting, customers must feel and sense a customized approach to attending and fulfilling their shopping needs (Kim & Choi, 2013). Since its initial opening in 2001, the Big Bazaar chain of stores located in India has enjoyed exponential growth, from four stores in 2001 to more than 150 stores in 2014 (Sreenivasulu et al., 2014). Big Bazaar's rapid expansion focuses on delivering customer experience and achieving brand loyalty through innovation, ambience, and unique promotional strategy (Sreenivasulu et al.). This focus drove the company to become the success it is today.

Brand Loyalty. The concept of brand loyalty was developed in the 1950's as a two-dimensional concept, which is consumer behavior and consumer attitude. In 1971, Jacoby and Chestnut presented further research on the concept and this signaled the beginning of the in-depth research into the concept of brand loyalty (Bilgili & Ozkul,

2015). In the late 1990's and early 2000's research into brand loyalty and its relation to repeat consumer purchasing behavior and customer experience had reached its highest levels. Some scholars view loyalty as tangible and measurable. Day (1976)

purported that brand loyalty is repeat business or consistent patronage. Customers' shopping needs are driven by intentional decisions and not by impulse. Repeat business and positive customer experiences are both compatible with brand loyalty. Customers who repeatedly have good experiences with a brand, tend to be the most loyal (Klaus and Maklan, 2013).

Loyalty is complex and comprises behavioral and attitudinal components, which are integral for formulating customer experience strategy (Babin et al., 2015). Retail managers should focus on the design and delivery of great customer experience and the cognitive and emotional attributes of service, for customer experience to be effective.

How to maintain or attain customers' loyalty has always been a challenge for retail managers. This challenge stems from the fact that customers are loyal because of a multiplicity of reasons. Some customers may patronize a store or brand because of price, prominence, appeal, store image, or friendliness of employees. The customer experience environment stores provide can help to formulate a unique combination of differentiation and exclusivity that will be difficult to emulate by competitors (Cho, Kim, & Kim, 2015).

Brand loyalty also impacts positively on the overall image and perceived value of a company. Brand loyalty is a key facet in determining an organization's value. The deeper the loyalty, the greater the perception of value (Klaus, 2014). Loyal customers make the intentional decision to repurchase and shop brands which they have had positive customer experiences with. This commitment augurs well with key financial measurements such as sales revenue, brand equity and profitability. Customer's perceive

loyalty from three distinct angles: (a) Cognitive - Customers' belief that their brand of choice is better, (b) Affective - The customer's attitude toward the brand, and (c)

Connotative – the customer's intent in repurchasing the brand. The customer's repeat business and consistent favorable experiences, will forge a positive and obdurate relationship with the brand, in which both parties will reap benefit. Intangibles such as the company's reputation and store aesthetics have a positive impact on brand loyalty through the mediating variable of customer satisfaction (Thomas, 2013). Customer support and loyalty involves factors such as getting rid of negative experiences and optimizing delight (Trif, 2013). When customers have positive experiences, they may serve as advocates for the organization. Customer advocacy may have a positive financial influence on the organization in the form of repeat business, increased customer counts, and increased profitability and sales (Weinman, 2015).

Brand loyalty is also integral to an organization's ability to retain its customers. Loyal customers are less price-sensitive. Less price sensitivity might improve profit margins, and more loyalty might reduce marketing expenditures for attracting new customers (Chahal & Dutta, 2014; Dhurup et al., 2013). The use of loyalty programs is a familiarization tactic, which may monitor customers' shopping activity and tangibly reward their loyalty. Loyalty programs might enhance customer satisfaction and overall commitment (Zhibin & Bennett, 2014). Loyalty programs offer promotions and benefits to loyal customers and relay value to members as appreciation for their loyalty. Retail stores may design loyalty programs by introducing frequent buyer cards, offering membership promotions, and discounts, to improve customer satisfaction and avert brand

defections (Grosso & Castaldo, 2015). Store loyalty programs may not always create loyalty. Lack of success may stem mainly from the absence of differentiation amongst the many store loyalty programs, and because customers may feel the need to join multiple store programs to enjoy tangible benefits such as price discounts (Zakaria et al., 2014).

Customer Experience and Competitive Advantage

Marketing and business research has undergone significant change from the 1990's (Klaus, 2014). Businesses began focusing on high turnover of consumer brands, to building customer relationships through service marketing, to now creating meaningful customer experiences. The initial paradigm shift from consumer brands to service marketing was noticeable in the 1990s, and researchers recorded a distinct change in both customer behavior (especially with the widespread use of the Internet) and organizational strategy, which focused on the importance of the customer-organizational relationship, along with the historic offering of goods and services (Herstein, Gilboa & Gamliel, 2014). Interactions between customers and organizations focused on a more communitycentric relationship, rather than just an organizational-centric function. Through community-centric relationships, firms formulated intentional strategy on how best to compete and manage those relationships built primarily from offering goods and services. Customer experience is the distinguishing feature in the drive to attain more market share and retain existing customers (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). A customer experience survey conducted by the Temkin group (Andajani et al., 2015) revealed that of the 27 US companies which carried out customer experience surveys, Amazon.com achieved the highest rating of over 80%, and 16 other renowned companies including

Costco, Sam's Club, Home Depot, Old Navy and Macy's all received customer experience scores of over 70% (Andajani et al., 2015). This exemplifies that customer experience not only creates exceptional value, but is extremely difficult to emulate.

Competitive advantage involves offering a unique product or service that an organization is able to provide as a strategy to meet or exceed its customer's needs (Hailey 2015). Because a large part of customer experience involves delivering a customized approach to fulfilling customer needs, it formulates an integral part of competitive advantage strategy. Some other aspects of competitive advantage strategies include employee training, leadership, technology, assortment of goods and services, and so on (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). Modern-day customers are focused on satisfying their shopping needs as quickly as possible (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Customers propensity to patronize retail establishments, is contingent on how efficient they perceive that their needs are met.

Customer loyalty is a major concern for retail stores across the globe. A loyal customer is a source of competitive advantage through repeat purchase and positive word of mouth (Thomas, 2013). Competitive advantage means that an organization is doing or providing something different from its competitors, however, this variance may not always be succinct (Thomas). Competitive advantage today cannot only be attained through the offering of products or services, exclusivity, prime location or by providing indelible customer experience (Herrera, 2015). Retailers need to use product differentiation to fulfill consumers' shopping needs and enhance value creation (Nanda, Kuruvilla, & Murty, 2013). Nanda, Kuruvilla and Murty asserted that this distinctive

element or differentiation can be a facet for the company to decisively attain and sustain the competitive advantage. Differentiation offers a unique avenue for customers to recognize and align themselves with the products and services that a company offers. This is how patronage and loyalty develops, and is maintained. Retail managers, for example, must find ways to consistently create customer experiences through the stimulation of sensorial, emotional and social senses. This creation of individualized customer experience strategy, and the vast scope of customer experience, means that retailers now have an avenue of differentiation, in which they can attain the competitive advantage (Nanda, Kuruvilla, & Murty, 2013). This process must be dynamic and innovative.

With the emergence of the Internet, more organizations are utilizing this platform as an avenue to attain competitive advantage. The Internet affords customers another touch point to add value to their interaction with organizations and to formulate perceptions before, during and after their encounter. The growing use of technology allows customers to fulfill their shopping needs quickly and remotely. Though this affords a new frontier of comfort and a novel niche market, customer experience perception and consumer behavior is in most cases driven by human to human interactions (Klaus, 2014). Ultimately, competitive advantage obtained by offering customers an unforgettable experience is one of the most powerful modern-day marketing strategies. Companies can attain competitive advantage by creating increased customer value, delivering unique and more consistent value than what their competitors offer (Ramaj & Ismaili, 2015). Customers feel special when they enjoy a pleasurable

experience, and this serves as a distinctive factor in determining where to shop and as a tool in attaining competitive advantage (Andajani et al., 2015).

Customer Experience Strategies

Modern day organizations have the task of managing the efficiency of customer experience strategy. This task includes how to create indelible customer experiences throughout all phases of customer engagement, to managing customers' expectations before, during, and after the shopping experience. Because customer experience is relational, rather than functional, it is more complicated than customer service and customer satisfaction (Klaus, 2014). Scholars have found it difficult to fully understand customer experience, and are often unable to proficiently offer astute advice to retail managers, and those on the front lines of administering customer experience.

Additionally, practitioners of customer experience agree there are innumerable reasons for the implementation, formulation, and evaluation of customer experience strategies. Some of these reasons might be as proactive as improving competitiveness through innovation, whilst others were reactively postured in reducing customer defections or repairing brand imaging (Klaus, 2014).

The management of customer experience is different from customer service, which involves specific service encounters that fall under the influence of the organization (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Effective CEM refers to intelligently deciphering and applying tactics and processes that work. This application is a result of evaluation from past research, learning from past mistakes, and adhering to which customer experience strategies work. Because customer experience involves some level of

preconception by customers, antiquated strategies such as solely providing superior goods and services fall far short of adequately addressing customer needs. The objective criteria, which managers use to evaluate operational, tactical, and strategic success, all share the common link of customer experience. These evaluation points range from customer feedback, word of mouth, to actual retention rates, and repeat business (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

Research shows that emotional appeal and connection is critical in determining consumers' behavior (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). The extent to which customer experience strategy is successful is highly contingent on its effectiveness in influencing consumer behavior. Subsequently, if customers have positive experiences, then the proclivity of repurchase behavior, retention, and loyalty is likely. Thus, the conveyance from the functional to more the self-indulgent aspect of goods and services portrays the significance of emotions to CEM and customer experience strategy (Nanda, Kuruvilla, & Murty, 2013). Emotional factors form the core fundamental of consumer behavior, and researchers, managers, and consultants perceive two distinct categories: extraordinary experiences and general evaluation of customer experience (Klaus, 2014).

Extraordinary experiences refer to amazing or unexpected customer experiences that do not conform to the usual comparison of expectations to perceptions (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Researchers often associate flow and peak experiences with extraordinary customer experience. Flow experiences are where customers get completely immersed in an event with no regard to egotistic elements and time. Conversely, peak experiences involve unique moments of joy. A peak customer experience for a longstanding retail

customer will be hearing his or her name over the public announcement system that they have won a special prize (Soderlund & Colliander, 2015). An understanding of the kinds of emotional experiences is essential to managers in determining which experiences drive which behavior. The multidimensional nature of customer experience involves the pre and post perceptions by customers. For retail managers to implement effective strategies, they must be broader and far reaching, than the historical functional service encounter strategies (Georgantzas & Katsamakos, 2016). In a retail store setting, the customer will assess experience based upon perceptions of the company before the visit, during the visit and after the visit. Part of the customer experience strategy is that the customer is ultimately the appraiser and creator of value, so in retrospect, customer experience is cocreated (Alhawari, 2013).

To fully optimize customer experience interactions, companies must align knowledge management tactics with strategic objectives. Customers offer a wealthy reservoir of knowledge. This knowledge can be utilized to formulate and implement strategy regarding product demand, competitive advantage, consumer behavior, and emerging target markets (Prakash, Sahney, & Vohra, 2015). Additionally, the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of strategy must be proactive and expedient in accounting for the variability in customer behavior and for achieving desired objectives such as retention, repeat business and loyalty (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

Customer Experience: Measuring the Immeasurable

Customer experience is complex, context-specific, and relative (Klaus, 2014). Though managers, scholars, and researchers tend to agree about the importance of

customer experience as a strategy for building and sustaining customer loyalty, they are divided, on its definition and measurement. This indecision has created a dilemma on formulating expedient strategies and managing the customer experience altogether (Klaus).

Modern-day customers assess the value of a product or service throughout the purchase process and not solely at the service encounter (Georgantzias & Katsamakias, 2016). This means that the historical perception of customer service delivery, though important, is insufficient to fully measure the value of a product or service (Singh, 2013). Though there is widespread acknowledgement that more organizations are using customer experience and proponents of customer experience agree that it should be the strategy used to build brand loyalty, there is no consensus on how exactly to measure it (Klaus and Maklan, 2013).

Historical measurements like SERVQUAL (a 22-point system measuring assurance, reliability, responsiveness, tangibility, and empathy) are used to measure service quality (Parasuraman, 2013). However, customer experience is more intricate than service quality. SERVQUAL focuses on the customers' perception of the service encounter and the interactions with employees; it does not consider post service value. Customer experience practitioners consider the delivery of value to customers and implement strategy which closely align to customers' sensorial, social, and emotional preconceptions and perceptions (Perez & Rodriguez, 2015).

The limited dimensions that SERVQUAL use, do not fully capture the entire gamete of customer experience (Zhang & Hou, 2013). SERVQUAL focuses

primarily on the customers' evaluation of the service encounter and not on the entire customer experience, post-product, and post-service process (Parasuraman, 2013; Zhang & Hou, 2013). Customers may deem subsets of the service encounter as positive and others as negative and this may adversely impact the quality of the entire customer experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Spence, et al. (2014) asserted that customer experience is customers' involvement at various levels, that is, emotional, sensorial, physical, spiritual and rational, making it impossible for any single scale to accurately measure customer experience. Other scholars posited that because customer experience includes customers' involvement and perception at every level, and not only of the quality of a product or service, it is virtually immeasurable (Courage, 2015; Singh, 2013).

Klaus and Maklan (2013), in attempting to measure customer experience at a major UK bank, developed a model called the customer experience quality (EXQ). Four distinct stages: scale generation, initial purification, refinement, and validation are measurements of key tenets of customer experience, which include loyalty, word of mouth, and satisfaction. Though the findings of this very limited survey proved helpful, they were context-centric, industry-centric, and as such, limited.

Customer experience is far broader and deeper than the concept of product or service quality that it replaces; naturally, its measure will be more complex. Many scholars have contended that service quality involves customers' evaluation of the service encounter and not customers' sojourn before and after the buying decision (SokolovMladenovic & Cuzovic, 2015; Spanyol, 2014). However, experience is not all encompassing, and it depends on the researcher, manager, or practitioner to decide which

features and dimensions should be included or which should be excluded. After these elements are decided upon, parameters are set, for example, customer retention, purchase levels, increase in customer counts, and the measurement of customer experience success strategies. Essentially, a key step in successfully evaluating a customer experience requires empathy. After this is decided, retail managers will be more suitably poised to measure and observe which strategies are most expedient (Spanyi, 2014).

Transition

Section 1 included the focus of the research study, the strategies retailers may use to improve customer experience as a platform for building brand loyalty. The first component of section 1 consisted of the background of the problem, the problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research and interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations and delimitations, the significance of the study, and the review of the professional and academic literature. Section 2 contains a restatement of the purpose statement and discussions of my role as the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data analysis, reliability and validity, and transition and summary. Section 3 offers the research findings, the study's application to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further research, reflections, and summary and conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore strategies retailers used for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience in retail businesses. In Section 2, I present the project information, which includes the purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method, and research design. Section 2 also includes specifics on population sampling, data collection and technique, data organization techniques, data analysis, and the reliability and validity. Section 3 will include the findings.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies retail managers used for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. The target population included retail managers from two retail establishments in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. The results of the study may contribute to positive social change by providing retail managers appropriate information to implement techniques, which would aid in attracting and retaining current and potential customers, while providing exceptional customer experience. The results of this study might also foster local economic development through job creation and increase discretionary spending.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role is crucial to the data collection process. The researcher plays a vital role understanding, assessing, and appreciating the experiences and reactions of research participants (Bashir, Sirlin, & Reeder, 2014). The researcher exhibits active listening, avoids casting judgements, and remains vested in the responses of each

participant (Bashir, Sirlin, & Reeder). To adhere to the Belmont Protocol Report, researchers must follow ethical standards and proper procedures to protect research participants (Zucker, 2014). My role in this qualitative multiple case study was to interview 10 participants, collect data, analyze data, and manage the interview process. Data collection involves gathering information through semistructured interviews and observation (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hater, 2014). I gathered information through semistructured interviews, managed the interview process, and protected the privacy of participants. Member checking is the process that allows participants to review and correct the researcher's version of the interview notes (Yin, 2016). I conducted member checking by allowing participants to review and correct interview notes. Like Chowdhury (2015), I used data coding methods to maintain veracity and research integrity, and these methods were simple and easy to follow. I have more than 15 years of experience in retail management from varying cultural settings and private retail establishments including the island of St. Lucia.

Wu, Xu, Wang, Ma, and Kuang (2013) asserted confirmation bias occurs when researchers make decisions based on preexisting beliefs. Confirmation bias occurs when the researcher uses preconceived experiences to interpret interview notes (Bashir et al., 2014). I reduced confirmation bias by reassessing my interpretation of the participants and challenged all preexisting assumptions I had about the participants. I kept an open mind free of suppositions about participants and their responses. Confirmation bias has a likeness to *the similar to me effect* that exists when interviewing potential job candidates (Malone et al., 2014). For instance, an interviewer may compare elements of their own

experiences to potential job candidates, and afford preferential treatment to candidates based on the commonality that exists between them.

Per Yin (2014), using an interview protocol is important to ensure data addresses the actual research question. I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), approval number 10-12-17-0267190, before starting the semistructured interviews. I developed and followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B) to conduct the interviews and kept the participants' information confidential. I conducted interviews to gain an understanding of strategies retail managers used to enhance customer experience and improve brand loyalty in the business. To maintain privacy and proper research correctness, I kept the participants' information confidential. I stored collected data in a safety deposit box and will keep it for a minimum of 5 years before discarding all electronic and nonelectronic transcripts.

Participants

To meet the eligibility criteria for participation in this study, I chose participants who are working in a retail establishment in Castries, St. Lucia in one of the following roles for a minimum of 4 years: managing director, store manager, assistant store manager, merchandising manager, front-end or customer service manager, or floor manager. The participants had experience and knowledge about customer experience strategies and how to build brand loyalty in a retail setting. This sample size was the nucleus of this research and offered firsthand accounts of the customer experience strategies that the managers used.

I contacted management officials and customers via e-mail to introduce myself and explained the purpose of the research. I also contacted research participants via email for permission to gather the appropriate data. As recommended by Morse and Coulehan (2015); Tetnowski (2015) and Yin (2014), I conducted confidential interviews and ensured all data gathering methods were anonymous. I assigned alpha-numeric symbols PT1, PT2, PT3, and so on, to all participants. This level of anonymity fostered trustworthiness, marginalized fear of reprisals, and encouraged honesty. After obtaining approval from IRB, I forwarded consent forms to all participants via email. Information collected will be secured in a safety deposit box for a minimum of 5 years, and only I have access to this safety deposit box.

Research Method and Design

Researchers use three main research methods: (a) qualitative, (b) quantitative, and (c) mixed methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Yin, 2014). The choice of research method a researcher will employ is contingent on which one accurately addresses the research question (Hammersley, 2013). The quantitative research method involves the collection and statistical interpretation of data (Venkatesh et al., 2013). The qualitative research method involves relaying the lived experiences of research participants in their natural setting (Elo et al., 2014). The mixed-methods is a combination of the qualitative and quantitative research methods (Mauceri, 2015).

Research Method

This qualitative research study involved recording the lived experiences and perceptions of research participants in their natural environment (Creamer & Tendhar,

2016; Sarma, 2015; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Le, 2014). Morse (2015) asserted that qualitative research has five different elements: phenomenology, grounded theory, narrative, ethnography, and case study. Qualitative research is used when a researcher needs to understand how the participant feels about an event, environment, or material object (Khan, 2014; Yin, 2014).

The qualitative research method is expedient when attaining the perceptions and views of research participants (Khan, 2014; Liang, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The qualitative research study relays the findings of this study in a manner which will transcend the underlying passion harnessed by its participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2013). The qualitative method was most suitable for this study because I was able to engage in interviews using open-ended questions and observed the behavior of participants as they responded to interview questions. I performed exhaustive inquiries and gained in-depth insight into the customer experience and brand loyalty strategies retail managers used in retail establishments in St. Lucia.

The quantitative research method involves the collection and statistical interpretation of data (Bambale, 2014; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Hafford-Letchfield, 2014; Stoudt, 2014). I did not use the quantitative method because my aim was not to conduct analyses that would generate statistical data. Also, I did not use the quantitative method for this research because the intention for the study was to obtain a profound understanding of strategies retailers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. If I had used the quantitative method, I would not have had the flexibility to

conduct interviews to find out the answers to *how* and *why* questions, and would also not have been able to get a deep understanding of the actual experience of participants.

The mixed-methods approach is a combination of qualitative research method and the quantitative research method, which is used in longitudinal research (Dumez, 2015; Mauceri, 2015; Tetnowski, 2015). Per Kachouie and Sedighadeli (2015), the mixedmethods research model involves more than one approach, and may be difficult to use. Although the qualitative component of the mixed-methods approach would have addressed my research question, the quantitative element dealt with the interpretation of statistical analyses, which was not a feature of my research study.

Research Design

Researchers use case study design to respond to *how* and *why* research questions (Dumez, 2015; Tetnowski, 2015; Yin, 2014). I employed a qualitative multiple case study design to collect data from participants in the form of interviews. The case study research design is appropriate when data are collected through observation and interviews (Creamer & Tendhar, 2016; Sarma, 2015; Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & Liang, 2014). The findings from research participants relayed actual, lived experiences and everyday thoughts. I summarized and analyzed the findings from interview questions to form the basis of this research. A multiple case study using an exploratory approach was suitable for the purposes of this research. Interview data collected from participants was analyzed to determine their perceptions on customer experience as a strategy for building brand loyalty.

Other qualitative research designs, such as ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative research, would have not sufficiently addressed the research problem and questions. Ethnography deals specifically with culture and can be cost prohibitive (Armstrong, 2015; Shimei, et al., 2016; Vernon, 2015), whilst narrative research affords individuals an opportunity to articulate their life stories (Kuronen, 2014; Raeburn et al., 2015; Von Contzen & Alders, 2015). The phenomenological research design is appropriate for the discovery of a phenomenon (Sloan & Bowe, 2013; Yin, 2014). I did not use phenomenology because this study did not involve the discovery of a phenomenon. The use of the case study was most appropriate to study the retail managers in their current environment and to explore the research problem. I asked probing questions to all participants until there were no new ideas, no new themes or no new codes from responses. I obtained data saturation after conducting interviews with 10 retail managers and performing member checking.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study was 10 retail managers from two companies within the retail sector in St. Lucia. The total population of participants included retail managers who have experience and knowledge in using customer experience strategies to build brand loyalty and increase sales revenue. The two retail establishments that I chose had a significant share of the retail market and used state-of the-art retailing technology and competitive strategy.

Researchers use purposive sampling in qualitative research to analyze and anchor the objectives of a research problem and allow transferability of research findings

(Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2014).

The purposive sampling method is most suitable for gaining lived experiences from qualified participants about a topic (Grossoehme, 2014; Marshall et al., 2013; Yin, 2014).

I used the purposeful sampling approach to collect data from participants who possessed thorough knowledge and all-around experience of retail operations, especially customer experience strategy. Purposeful sampling may also reveal potential similarities and differences that when two scenarios are compared (Yin, 2014). I selected retail managers who fit into two categories: (a) those who were in a managerial role for 2 or more years, and (b) were responsible for five or more employees with specific job titles. The participants consisted of the following categories: managing director, store manager, assistant store manager, merchandising manager, front-end or customer service manager, or floor manager. Retail managers with requisite knowledge and experience of retail operations were adequate for the population of this study. I conducted the interviews via Skype. I allocated 30 to 40 minute time blocks for each interview and conducted the interviews at the convenience of the participants. Emmel (2015) asserted that qualitative researchers obtain data saturation with a sample size of between five and 50 participants. Yin (2014) asserted that when comparing multiple case studies, replication will occur until data saturation is reached. I interviewed 10 retail managers, asked probing questions, and reached data saturation.

Ethical Research

The informed consent process involves explaining to all participants (a) the purpose of the proposed research study, (b) how the proposed study might be beneficial

to their business, (c) the process for conducting the study, and (d) the voluntary nature of the proposed study (Zucker, 2014). I disseminated consent forms (see Appendix A) to all research participants via e-mail and asked participants to respond I consent in replying to the e-mail, should they agree to participate. According to Morse and Coulehan (2014), research participants may cease participation at any point in a research process. I contacted participants via e-mail and Skype to collect data, and informed them of their right to cease participation in the research process. Gibson, Benson, and Brand (2013), Morse and Coulehan (2014) and Zhou and Nunes (2013) addressed compensation methods, contacting participants, and participants' right to cease from participating in research. I provided no compensation for participating in this research. Participation in this study was completely voluntary.

The ethical protection of participants is vital in research (Honig, Lampel, Siegel, & Drnevich, 2014; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014). To provide ethical protection, I used the Belmont report. I adhered to the statutes of the Belmont report, which covers three main areas: (a) autonomy, which requires that participants have the right to participate or not participate in the research study; (b) beneficence, involving measures the researcher implements to reduce potential risks to participants; and (c) justice, which involves potential benefits for participants who participate in the research (Honig et al., 2014; Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Zhou & Nunes, 2013).

Participants signed informed consent forms relaying their willingness to participate in the study, agreed to tapings of interviews, and replied *I consent* in the email

response. After receipt of IRB approval, I selected suitable participants from the list I was provided and obtained authorization from the research sites. I included the Walden University IRB approval number 10-12-17-0267190 on the final doctoral manuscript. The names of the two companies, along with the names of the 10 participants remained anonymous to safeguard the integrity of research and keep the identities of participants confidential (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I used alpha-numeric symbols BUS1 and BUS2 to represent the two companies and use PT1 to PT10 to represent the 10 participants.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher is considered the primary data collection tool during research (DeMassis & Kotlar, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015; Yin 2014). I was the primary data collection instrument for this research and used semistructured interviews to collect data from research participants. Interviews are an effective way to collect data from participants with varying viewpoints on similar concepts (DeMassis & Kotlar, 2014; Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). Participants tend to give more elaborate and thorough answers when researchers ask them open-ended questions (Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Newington & Metcalfe, 2014; Yin, 2014). I conducted semistructured interviews by asking open-ended questions (see Appendix C) to determine how retail managers use customer experience strategies to build brand loyalty.

Case study researchers collect data from documentation that adds supporting evidence to the semistructured interviews (Kornbluh, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Yin, 2014). Conducting triangulation minimizes the threat to validity (Marshall &

Rossman, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Noble & Smith; Yin, 2014). To collect information from company documents, I reviewed the company's website, advertisements, fliers, store layouts, and merchandising policy. This type of secondary document collection can improve value to case studies because they provide historical data (El Haddad, 2015). I achieved triangulation by using company documents, participants' body language and responses to interview questions.

Member checking is one of the approaches which researchers use for maintaining reliability (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Noble & Smith, 2015). I provided research participants an opportunity to review and correct the answers they supplied during interviews. I ensured reliability and validity in the data collection process by asking openended questions to retail business operators (see Appendix C), and used triangulation, member checking, and recorded similar themes, to attain data saturation. Researchers attain data saturation when themes are recurrent or have a high degree of similarity (Kornbluh, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Data Collection Technique

The researcher is considered the primary data collection instrument because the researcher has first-hand experience with the research subject (Denzin, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I was the primary data collection instrument in this research study. Researchers employ various data collection techniques such as (a) interviews, (b) company documents (c) focus groups (d) observation to obtain triangulation (Kornbluh, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Researchers use semistructured interviews as a primary tool for data collection in qualitative research (Denzin, 2014; Holmes, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2014). I used semistructured interviews to ask research participants questions for exploring the strategies retail managers used to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. The use of open-ended semistructured interview questions allowed the 10 interviewees an opportunity to uninhibitedly express their views and opinions on the research topic. Some of the advantages of interviewing allows for (a) more elaborate responses, (b) more elaborate questions, and (c) garnering more information about the research participant (Harvey, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Yin, 2014). The use of semistructured interviews may prove disadvantageous because (a) participants may feel uneasy answering questions in such a formal setting, and (b) answers may not truly reflect participants' real views or opinions (Harvey, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Yin, 2014).

Researchers use company documents as a data collection tool (Kornbluh, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2016). I used company documents as a second data collection tool for my research study. The review of company documents, the use of interview data, and observation are critical in reaching triangulation (Leedy & Ormrod,

2013; Singh, 2014; Yin, 2016). Using customer feedback forms, company's website, advertisements, fliers, suggestion forms, merchandising policies, customer databases and so on, I explored and documented trends to determine how the strategies retail managers use build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. One of the salient advantages of documentation is being able to review information multiple times to

ensure accuracy (Yin, 2014). A disadvantage of documentation is that the research participants may not want to disclose documentation they perceive confidential (Yin, 2014).

Before initiating the data collection process, I submitted an application to request permission from Walden University IRB to conduct the study. Additionally, I obtained formal authorization from the research site for approval to carry out the proposed study.

After IRB approval, I emailed invitation letters and consent forms to research participants (see Appendix A). Participants had the option to withdraw without penalty at any stage of the interview process.

One of the ways researchers improve validity, accuracy, credibility, and applicability is through member checking (Harvey, 2014; Nyhan, 2015; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). I allowed members to review and correct my written interpretation of their words, to ensure their views are accurate. Audio-recorded interviews will ensure that research participants' views are accurately and fully captured (Morse & Coulehan, 2014; Yin, 2014). According to Shader (2015) a pilot study is an important element of research, but may not necessarily ensure success. I did not conduct a pilot study for this proposed research.

After I decided on the selection of the 10 research participants, I provided them with an interview schedule, listing available dates and times. The participants then confirmed their availability via e-mail. I scheduled 30 to 40 minute interviews at a setting that was convenient and professional. I remained in contact with the 10 research participants to ensure familiarity, confidence, and openness during the interview process.

Data Organization Technique

To conduct and securely log the views and perceptions of research participants and log reflective journal notes, I used Skype to conduct and audio record the interviews. Researchers use NVivo software to analyze data in research (Sarma, 2015; Sotiriadou et al., 2014; Woods et al., 2015). I used NVivo 11 software to upload data from Microsoft excel and then analyze the data. I created a digital filing system to organize data. Research participants often share concern for confidentiality and anonymity during the data collection process (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). I secured the USB drive containing all digital data, along with transcripts of nondigital data in a safety deposit box for a minimum of 5 years. I created a password-protected folder for each research participant. Qualitative researchers use a filing system to maintain confidentiality and enhance integrity (Thomas, 2015). I assigned alpha-numeric codes, BUS1 and BUS2 representing the two companies, and PT1 to PT10 representing the 10 research participants. This initiative preserved confidentiality and anonymity.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies retailers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. The overarching research question for the research study was, What strategies do retail managers use to improve customer experience and build brand loyalty? I analyzed the data from the facts and views of research participants within their natural environment.

Qualitative researchers use triangulation in data analysis to demonstrate trustworthiness of the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2014). There

are four distinct types of triangulation: (a) data triangulation, (b) investigator triangulation, (c) theory triangulation, and (d) method triangulation (Yin, 2014).

Methodological triangulation involves assimilating and analyzing data from a variety of sources (Carter et al., 2014). For the purposes of this research, I conducted methodological triangulation by using semistructured interviews, supporting documents, observation, and journal to log and review interview results.

Researchers use a coding system to uphold research integrity, validity, and reliability (Ingham-Broomfield, 2015; Thomas, 2015; Yin, 2014). Research participants often share concern for confidentiality and anonymity during the data collection process (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). Firstly, to ensure confidentiality and maintain anonymity during data analysis, I assigned alpha-numeric codes BUS1 and BUS2 to represent the two companies, and PT1 to PT10 to represent the 10 retail managers – five from each store. Some qualitative researchers use NVivo software to analyze and transcribe data from research (Stuckey, 2015; Thomas, 2015). Secondly, I used NVivo11 software to transcribe the data gathered from reflective journals, interview notes, and audio recordings. Researchers also use NVivo to group, sort, and identify emerging themes (Kelly et al., 2013; Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2015). I used NVivo 11 software to group and sort data and identify relevant themes from the transcribed data. Finally, I correlated the relevant themes from the interviews, documents and reflective journal notes with the literature (including new studies published since writing the proposal) and the conceptual framework of systems theory proposed by Richard L. Olivier in 1977 (as discussed in Oghuma et al., 2016).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability and validity in qualitative research studies refer to the quality of the proposed research study (Elo et al., 2014; Foley & O’Conner, 2013; Mangioni & McKercher, 2013). Reliability refers to consistency and the ability of the proposed research to yield a similar result in the future (Liang & Chia, 2014; Noble & Smith, 2015; Tsang, 2014). Qualitative researchers assure reliability by (a) recording the entire data collection and analysis, (b) specifying the research strategy, (c) detailing participant selection, (d) and accentuating the researcher’s role (Houghton et al., 2013; Thomas, 2015; Yin, 2014). I ensured reliability in this qualitative research study by using a journal and a tape recorder to record participant interviews and embrace case study protocol.

Qualitative researchers use member checking to help improve reliability of research by allowing participants to confirm data which the researcher documents (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Nyhan, 2015). I used member checking to ensure reliability by giving research participants an opportunity to review interview notes. Researchers use triangulation to ascertain different views and perceptions from research participants (Yin, 2014). I conducted semistructured interviews and observation to obtain different viewpoints from research participants. I then documented participants’ views using a journal and audio recorder.

Dependability. Reliability has a lot to do with dependability in qualitative research. In fact, dependability is the qualitative corollary for reliability (Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative researchers ensure dependability by preserving consistency throughout the

research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Munn et al., 2014; Yin, 2014). I transcribed interviews and used NVivo 11 software to analyze information from research participants. To ensure consistency and minimize mistakes, I used member checking by allowing research participants an opportunity to review interview notes as in a similar research by (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

Validity

Validity refers to honesty and genuineness of research findings (Noble & Smith, 2015; Wilson, 2014; Zachariadis et al., 2013). Three key subsets of validity are creditability, which ensures results are believable; transferability, which refers to the applicability of the research in a different setting; and confirmability, which measures the objectivity of the research results (Drisko, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015). Yin (2013) explained that using a small number of experts in a case study research affords a more profound understanding of the research topic. I interviewed 10 retail managers using semistructured interviews to obtain their varying perspectives on customer experience strategies as a strategy for building brand loyalty. These interviews involved asking open-ended questions which allowed managers an opportunity to offer more elaborate responses. Noble and Smith (2015) suggested that for researchers to validate results they must perform creditability, transferability, and confirmability tests. I conducted member checking to maintain validity throughout the research process.

Creditability. Creditability refers to the trustworthiness of research findings (Drisko, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2013). Researchers establish credibility by using strategies such as peer scrutiny, observation, member checking, triangulation,

and recurrent themes (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). To ensure credibility, I documented recurrent themes which emanated from participant interviews and performed member checking by allowing participants to review and validate interview notes. Researchers conduct methodological triangulation by collecting and analyzing data from different sources (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Kornbluh, 2015; Wilson, 2014). I conducted methodological triangulation by analyzing the data from participant interviews, observation and company documents.

Transferability. Transferability refers to the extent to which a qualitative research is applicable other environments (Drisko, 2016; Thomas, 2015; Tsang, 2014). To ensure transferability, researchers use purposeful criterion sampling for analyzing data from specific groups of research participants (Robinson, 2014). To guarantee transferability, I used purposeful criterion sampling and reflective journaling.

Confirmability. Confirmability refers to actual research results and not participant bias (Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015; Yin, 2014). Researchers use methodical triangulation to ensure confirmability. The methodical triangulation process includes the use of semistructured interviews and supporting documents to maintain an evidentiary trail (Houghton et al., 2013; Kaczynski et al., 2014; Yin, 2013). To ensure confirmability, I used semistructured interviews, supporting documents and a journal to log and review interview results. I also use member checking to ensure confirmability.

Data Saturation. Researchers reach data saturation when themes are recurrent or have a high degree of similarity Kornbluh, 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Yin, 2014). I

reached data saturation by conducting semistructured interviews of 10 retail store managers who used customer experience strategies for building brand loyalty; I attained data saturation, when themes contained a high degree of similarity or when no new themes emerged.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 of this study included information on the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection technique, data business techniques, data analysis, and reliability and validity. Also addressed were the rationale for choosing a qualitative exploratory multiple case study design, discussions of the purposive sampling criteria and semistructured interviews. In Section 3, I present the findings, the application to professional practice, the implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, reflections, and a conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies retail managers for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. After interviewing retail managers from two establishments, I identified one overarching theme and five subthemes. The importance of building and sustaining loyalty was the overarching theme. The five subthemes were (a) competitive advantage, (b) customer experience strategy, (c) store image, (d) profitability, and (e) employee training. Findings from the study affirmed that the importance of building and sustaining loyalty was the most highlighted component from the results of the study. Section 3 comprised of the presentation of my findings, discussion of applications for professional practice and implications for social change, recommendations for action and future research, my reflections, and a conclusion to the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question of this study was, What strategies do retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience in retail businesses in Castries, St. Lucia? One overarching theme (the importance of building and sustaining brand loyalty) and five subthemes (competitive advantage, customer experience strategy, store image, profitability, and employee training) arose from the analysis of interview responses and business documents such as customer suggestions, campaign fliers, merchandizing policy, and statements and other relevant information from the company's website.

Overarching Theme: The importance of Building and Sustaining Loyalty

Interview participants from both retail establishments mentioned that building and sustaining brand loyalty were key components in determining which customer experience strategies to implement. Brand loyalty is complex and comprises behavioral and attitudinal components, which are vital for formulating customer experience strategy

(Babin et al., 2015). In their responses to Interview Questions 1, 2, 3, and 4, PT1 through PT4 from BUS1 and PT1, PT2 and PT3 from BUS2 indicated that building and sustaining brand loyalty were integral in determining which customer experience strategies worked. The success of retail stores is contingent on customers' response to the products and services they offer. If customers respond positively, sales volume and profitability will trend positively, and if customers respond negatively, these operational indicators will respond negatively (Gupta, 2014). Additionally, customers who have positive experiences will most likely be repeat shoppers, a trend which will positively impact building and sustaining customer loyalty (Klaus, 2014).

The use of technology by retailers has been essential in designing intentional and targeted CRM strategies to continually maximize existing relationships and in determining and evaluating future CEM strategies (Mili et al., 2016). Peppers and Rogers (2016) contended that companies, with the use of technology, can now hone in on customers' tastes and preferences to optimize repeat sales and improve profitability. PT2 and PT3 of BUS2 indicated that they use loyalty cards for tracking customer loyalty, improving customer experience, and optimizing sales revenue. Customers' shopping needs are driven by calculated decisions, and not by impulse. Repeat business and

positive customer experiences are both compatible with brand loyalty. Customers who repeatedly have good experiences with a brand tend to be the most loyal (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). In response to Interview Question 1 and 2, PT1 and PT2 from BUS2 mentioned that when the focus is on building and sustaining brand loyalty, they will continually formulate strategies which differentiate their business from that of their competitors. Customers are loyal for various reasons. Customers' loyalty may stem from price, prominence, appeal, store image, friendliness of employees, and so on (Cho, Kim, & Kim, 2015). The customer experience stores provide can help to formulate a unique combination of differentiation and exclusivity that will be difficult to emulate by its competitors (Cho, Kim, & Kim, 2015). PT3 of BUS2 mentioned that the use of customer loyalty cards assisted in creating a customer database which was used to tangibly reward loyal customers (prizes are awarded on national television and visibly displayed in all stores) for their continued patronage. This participant asserted that this strategy has been successful in maintaining loyal customers and in attracting new ones.

Evidence from the literature in Section 1 relating to brand loyalty, customer loyalty, and customer experience, coincide with the overarching theme, which emerged from data collection. The findings also relate to the conceptual framework of ECT, which highlight customer behavior that may foster repeat business. To truly create relevant experiences for customers, retail managers must interact with customers utilizing a communication channel with which the customers identify.

Subtheme 1: Competitive Advantage

PT1, PT2, PT3 and PT5 from BUS1 and PT1, PT3, PT5 of BUS2 answered Interview Question 3 by stating that the implementation of customer experience strategy was integral in differentiating their product gaining the competitive advantage and sustaining customer loyalty. Participants from BUS2 noted that their establishment owns a company website and advertise their promotions online. PT3 from BUS2 noted that “although we do not offer online shopping, customers still visit our website to take advantage of new promotions and deals”.

PT3 from BUS2 also said that the website is used to profile *product of the week* specials and discounts to which customers respond. Participants from BUS2 also noted that not many retail establishments focus on their websites, and if the retailer owns a website, “most of the time the website is not monitored or updated”. Hailey (2015) contended that competitive advantage involves offering a unique product or service that an organization is able to provide as a strategy to meet or exceed its customer’ needs.

Retail managers need to utilize product differentiation to enhance value creation and improve customer experience (Nanda, Kuruvilla, & Murty, 2013). Some salient aspects of competitive advantage strategies include skilled employees, leadership, technology, wide assortment of goods and services, and loyalty programs (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). The implementation of customer experience strategy may allow retail managers an avenue to differentiate their product from that of their competitors (MacGillavry & Wilson, 2014). Today, the use of technology in retail is vital to the organization’s success. Organizations leverage technology to obtain customer feedback

and address customer concerns. Some retailers use data analytics to gain a competitive advantage.

The theory used as the conceptual framework for my study, is consistent with the results of the study. Lin et al. (2015) used ECT to explore customer expectations, customer experience, customer satisfaction and brand loyalty. The customer's expectations of a company at varying customer experience points is useful in formulating future strategies and determining competitiveness (Komarov & Avdeeva, 2015). Retail managers may attain the competitive advantage, improve sales revenue, and improve customer loyalty if they implement appropriate customer experience strategy.

Confirmation from the literature review regarding the importance of competitive advantage – especially product differentiation and its role in determining the expediency of customer experience strategy is well aligned with the theme of competitive advantage. Competitive advantage today cannot only be attained through the offering of products or services, exclusivity, prime location or by providing indelible customer experience (Keisidou et al., 2013). Retailers need to use product differentiation to fulfill consumers' shopping needs and enhance value creation (Nanda, et al., 2013). Retail managers may experience improved operational results if they strive to attain the competitive advantage by using customer experience as a vehicle for product differentiation.

Subtheme 2: Customer Experience Strategy

Customer experience is the distinguishing feature in the drive to attain more market share and retain existing customers (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). A large part of customer experience is delivering a customized approach to satisfying the needs of

customers (Yazdani & Murad, 2015). In response to Interview Question 2, PT3 from BUS1 indicated that

we have noticed customers respond to a personalized experience from the store. Since most customers have cell phones, we send out personalized text messages to connect with them and to inform them of various promotions taking place at the store that are not yet publicly advertised. This is one of the things we have been doing that I see positive results from. Because of that, customers keep coming to our store and also let us know they received these texts.

PT1, PT3, PT5 of BUS2 also stated that product differentiation was important in sustaining customer loyalty and attaining the competitive advantage. PT3 of BUS2, continued to note that,

we are always working to improve and differentiate our product. Product differentiation is what we are all about. It doesn't make good business sense to sell the same products, and offer the same services, in the same way. Our leadership team is always working together to innovate and improve our offerings. We try our best to keep the company's website updated with our new products and promotions. We have found that several customers respond to the promotions of products from our website and blast text messages. That is a key facet of our competitive advantage.

Klaus (2014) stated that customer experience is relational, rather than functional, it is more much complicated than customer service and customer satisfaction. For retail managers to formulate effective customer experience strategies, they must be broad and

far reaching beyond the scope of traditional service encounter strategies (Georgantzas & Katsamakos, 2016). PT1, PT3 and PT5 of BUS2 declared the importance for all employees, especially service personnel, to know all top customers on a first name basis. PT1 and PT5 of BUS2 mentioned that their marketing department sent out birthday and holiday cards to their top 50 customers. Participants from BUS2 also said that some customers give online reviews about their service.

Customer experience involves some level of preconception by customers. Antiquated strategies such as solely providing superior goods and services do not adequately address the needs of the modern customer (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Retail managers need to formulate, implement, and evaluate proactive customer experience strategy which aligns with the multidimensional needs of today's customer (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). All participants from BUS2 mentioned the desire to connect with customers 'on an emotional or personal level.' PT2 from BUS1 and PT3 from BUS2 recognized loyal customers on their versions of "customer appreciation" days. PT3 of BUS2 also recognized the first 20 mother's during their annual Mother's Day store giveaway.

PT1 through PT5 of BUS1 and PT2, PT3 and PT5 of BUS2 mentioned "sustained" or "improved" customer loyalty was one of the measurements that their companies used to determine the success of customer experience strategies. PT2, PT3 and PT5 of BUS2 stated that the use of their "loyalty card" was significant in determining "foot traffic and sales revenue metrics." All the participants from BUS2 indicated that there was "consistent overview of their customer experience strategy, to ensure desirable

results.” The participants from BUS2 also mentioned the company uses its website to promote new products and have seen the results of these promotions reflected in the movement of the new items on store shelves.

The ECT, the conceptual framework of this study, is well aligned with the results of this study. The ECT involves the customer’s intention to repurchase or discontinue use of a product or service, and the evaluation of customer experience (Joo & Choi, 2016). Retail managers must consistently formulate and implement effective customer experience and brand loyalty strategies, to ensure that customer needs are satisfied (Klaus & Maklan, 2013).

Evidence from the literature review, which discussed customer experience strategies as an avenue for attaining competitive advantage and building brand loyalty, was supportive of the customer experience strategy theme. Customer experience involves preconception by customers; historical and purely functional strategies, such as solely providing superior goods and services, fall short of adequately addressing customer needs (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Evaluative points such as customer feedback, word of mouth, retention rates, and repeat business form the basis upon which customer experience strategy is formulated, implemented and evaluated (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). Retail managers may rely on the formulation of customer experience strategy as an avenue to differentiating their products and gaining the competitive advantage (Hailey, 2015).

Subtheme 3: Store Image

Store image – ambiance, store cleanliness, signage, aroma, merchandising, and so on, appeal to the sensorial facets of customers (Nasermoadeli, Ling, & Maghnatil, 2013).

Some scholars agree that store image is a critical strategy that retailers explore to connect with customers and to enhance customer experience (Hosseini, Jayashree & Malarvizhi, 2014). PT1 and P4 from BUS1 and all participants of BUS2 contended that store aesthetics or image was significant in improving customer experience and building brand loyalty. PT1 and PT4 from BUS1 mentioned that they “pride their image on store standards and always have designated employees on the floor to take care of spills or accidents, and to keep the floor clean at all times.” PT5 from BUS2 stated “merchandising and ambiance are uncompromisable facets” of their company’s culture.

Some participants added that the merchandising of products (how and where products are placed on the sales floor) is a crucial element to maintaining store image. PT1 and PT5 of BUS2 stressed the importance of planograms and merchandising policy to maintain standards. PT3 and PT5 from BUS2 stated that they work with vendors and stakeholders to continually improve ambiance and store image.

PT5 from BUS2 indicated

the importance of building “strategic alliances” with vendors to optimize the merchandising of direct-store-deliveries. Vendors are financially vested in the effective merchandising of their product, because the more their product turns over, the more they get rewarded. This strategy also offers great savings in the form of labor costs.

The conceptual framework of this study, the ECT, matched the results of this study. The ECT involves customers’ preconceived expectations, and whether they are confirmed or dispelled after the actual experience (Atapattu et al., 2016). The store’s

image forms an integral subset of customer experience strategy because it directly impacts customers on a sensorial and emotional level.

The store image subtheme is well supported within the literature review, which discussed store atmospherics as an essential element of customer experience strategy and brand loyalty (Hosseini, Jayashree & Malarvizhi, 2014). A 2015 study conducted to determine the effects of pharmacy store image on customer loyalty and satisfaction in South Korea, found that store image had a positive impact on both customer loyalty and customer satisfaction (Lee, Lee, & Lee, 2015). Store image, is one of the most significant factors of a retail store's survival and growth (Grah & Tominc, 2015). Maintaining the appearance of the store is an important aspect retailers should not neglect. Ignoring such detail can have a negative impact on the customer journey.

Subtheme 4: Profitability

The profitability subtheme emerged from responses to Question 4. PT1 through PT5 from BUS1 and PT1 through PT4 from BUS2 mentioned that increased sales revenue, brand loyalty and profitability were the measurements that they used to determine whether existing customer experience strategies were successful.

The response from PT2 BUS2 stated,

there is continuous and rigorous evaluation of current customer experience strategies to ensure that they are yielding desirable results. We do that based on feedback we receive online from our customers. Profitability and improved customer headcounts are the main yardsticks used as well. If these two parameters are met, then we continue with current strategies, if they are not, then we adjust

them accordingly. Because customers have smart phones and have access to the internet, we ensure they receive our promotions every day, via text and on through the website. The website as a communication channel is integral in relaying promotions on a timely basis, and in enhancing sales revenue and profitability.

Businesses may formulate and implement precise strategy to cope with changes in the business environment, to improve proficiency, and to increase profitability (Vargas, 2015). Customer experience strategy must continually adapt to the needs of the everchanging customer, and retail managers must be expediently poised to do so. PT5 of BUS1 described profitability,

as a key – if not the key ingredient, of our organization’s ability to innovate.

Moreover, if there’s no profitability, then there are no resources to adequately strategize for the future. We need to achieve profitability, sustain, and continually improve our brand loyalty, to fulfill the needs of our customers.

There was evidence within the literature review which supported the profitability subtheme. Gupta (2014) contended that when customers have positive experiences this augured well for operational indicators such as sales revenue and profitability. Loyal customers make the intentional decision to repurchase brands which they have had positive customer experiences with. This commitment augurs well with key financial measurements such as sales revenue, brand equity and profitability (Thomas, 2013).

Subtheme 5: Employee training

Employee training is essential to the existence of an organization (Dwomoh, 2015). All the participants in this research study agreed that the continuous training of employees was key to their success. In response to Interview Question 5, participants from BUS1 stated that some of the customer experience training programs they used to improve employee skills included providing excellent customer service, improving product knowledge, and providing hands on training. PT3 of BUS1 mentioned

the integral part of our customer experience strategy is to ensure that every customer walks out of their establishment as a satisfied customer, and proper employee training makes that possible.

PT3 reiterated that a key component of their customer experience strategy is for employees to treat every customer ‘like an individual, and not like a statistic’. PT5 from BUS1 noted that although there is always the need for continuous training, the costs associated with training, makes it very prohibitive. This participant mentioned that most of their managers received extensive training, and these managers transmitted the training to subordinates.

In response to Interview Question 5, BUS2 participants stated that training in cutting edge technology to maximize relationship building was key to their customer experience strategy. The use of their website, customer loyalty cards, and the construction of a customer database was integral in connecting with customers beyond a business level. BUS2 participants also contended that these facets allowed them to differentiate their product, from that of their competitors.

PT5 BUS2 highlighted,

our organization places a tremendously high value on the need for continuous training and re-training of all employees. Our senior staff are well versed in the aspects of sound leadership because of extensive training. Training is also one of the tools that we use to differentiate ourselves from our major competitors.

In response to Interview Question 6, PT1 and PT2 BUS2 added,

though we have an extensive training program, our customer counts have consistently trended upwards, and customer complaints are marginal. However, the effectiveness of our training program as relates to customer experience and brand loyalty is truly reflected in how our customers feel about shopping at our establishment, website views, and whether they decide to return.

The training segment from the literature review was supportive of the employee training subtheme, which developed from the results of the study. Yazdani and Murad (2015) purported that key elements of competitive advantage strategy include employee training, leadership, technology, assortment of goods and services, and so on. Dwomoh (2015) asserted, the consistent training of employees in customer experience is paramount to the effective implementation of overall corporate strategy.

The conceptual framework of this study, ECT, supported the employee training subtheme that emerged from data. The concept of ECT is simple. Customers have a level of expectation before patronizing a retail establishment, or purchasing a product, and if the expectation is met positively, the customer is satisfied. Conversely, if the expectation is not met positively, the customer is dissatisfied. Employee training is vital in fulfilling

customer expectation. There must be an existing employee-customer connection. Once that connection is established, employees must maintain a close business relationship with customers to understand customer needs. Retail managers should also treat customer suggestions and needs with the highest priority.

ECT concept involves employees being trained and being equipped to provide customers with appropriate solutions to their needs. Employees should be trained to be conversant with products and services of the retail establishment. Regardless of employee skill level, if they are not knowledgeable of the products and services of the business, the potential for increased sale of products may not be realized (Pritchett, 2014). Businesses improve when the competency levels of employees are enhanced and they are consistently empowered (Slater, Evans, & Turner, 2015). Employee training is a catalyst for repeat business and increased sales revenue.

Applications to Professional Practice

The strategies emphasized in this research study to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience might assist retail managers improve sales revenue and sustain profitability. The objective of the study was to explore the strategies retail managers used to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. The findings of this study were helpful to retail managers in seeking to explore and use strategies for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience in retail establishments. The results of this study might also help retail managers and retail owners formulate an introspective analysis of their current strategies and determine how effective they are in

building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. This self-examination might be vital in attaining or sustaining the competitive advantage.

Retail managers can explore strategies relating to building and sustaining loyalty as an avenue in achieving organizational goal (Babin et al., 2015). Within this strategy is the need to fully incorporate customer experience as a distinctive competitive element. Customer experience is the distinguishing feature in the drive to attain more market share and retain existing customers (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). BUS2 participants indicated that there was ‘consistent overview of their customer experience strategy, to ensure desirable results’. CEM is critical in viewing the organization as a synergistic whole from the customer’s viewpoint and assists organizational leaders efficiently manage points of interface with the customer (Duplessis & DeVries, 2016). CEM focuses on every facet of the company’s operations – from its website to its customer service department (Duplessis & DeVries).

Havir (2017) urged retail managers to institute formal standards that showcase a clear path to analyzing customer experience feedback. This would provide a more comprehensive view of the factors and dimensions of customer experience. As an opportunity for improvement, retail managers should scrutinize customer feedback and leverage the information to create action plans and workstreams for ensuring customer concerns are heard and acted upon promptly. Managing customer experience in this manner may influence customers’ behavior by improving trust, loyalty, satisfaction, and financial performance. Having a customer experience manager is important in

implementing those strategies to further drive organizational change, improve customer loyalty, and enhance customer experience.

Keisidou et al., (2013) asserted that competitive advantage cannot only be attained through the offering of products or services. According to Hailey (2015), competitive advantage involves offering a unique product or service that an organization is able to provide as a strategy to meet or exceed its customer' needs. To gain a competitive advantage, customer experience must be the premiere strategy and include customer feedback, employees, leadership, and technology. Retail managers should leverage the collective experience of a cross-functional team that includes human resources, finance, marketing, risk, product and technology to engage in exercises that chart true customer experience. Executing these action plans may increase profitability and competitive advantage of the retail establishment.

Employee training was another subtheme that emerged from the data collection. According to (Dwomoh, 2015), achieving excellence in customer experience is a direct result of every employee living the brand promise of the organization. Some employees from various departments may not be comfortable with customer experience because of its interactive nature. Although BUS1 PT5 indicated that training could be cost prohibitive, retail managers should invest in training to empower employees to become customer centric, optimize employee proficiency, and to create an integrated structure involving all employees of the organization; while ensuring commitment to accomplishing organizational goals. Retail managers should obdurately work on shaping

a culture which excites employees to actively participate in all aspects of customer experience strategy.

The concept of store image was another subtheme that emerged from the results of the study. For some customers, quality of merchandise, ambience, service staff formulate the main areas of store image (Dhurup et al., 2013; Spence, et al., 2014), whereas, for other customers, this experience centers on perceived prominence of the store (Pritchett, 2014). Lu (2014) purported that patronage and purchase intentions have been found to be more highly correlated with customers' perceptions about store image than product quality, pricing, or variety. Retail managers should be mindful that customers assess a store's image by associating the way they feel, to what they see. This behavior may have an influence on the customer's decision to repurchase. Store image strategies must reflect the brand promise and corporate culture. Upholding store culture and brand promise are contingent on how effective retail managers are at optimizing customer experience at the operational level.

The subtheme of profitability also developed from the results of the study. Relationships are built with existing customers, and new strategies are engineered to maximize sales and profitability (Ramaj & Ismaili, 2015). Retail managers are urged to understand the powerful nexus between customer experience and profitability. The main objectives of customer experience are to enhance customer retention, profitability, and to sustain growth. Retail managers should use appropriate software that can make a direct and measurable contribution to the success of their operations.

Implications for Social Change

The results of the study contribute to social change by providing retail managers supplemental information on strategies used for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. Retail managers may value the importance of implementing appropriate strategy which build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. The findings may also help elucidate on the broad scope of the concept of customer experience and offer some insight into its many operational subsets. Through the implementation of expedient strategy, retail managers might attain more desirable operational results which will augur well with employment and sponsorship opportunities for the local community.

Recommendations for Action

Findings and recommendations from this study may apply to any retail manager considering strategies building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. Implementing appropriate customer experience strategy is integral in connecting with customers on an emotional and sensorial level. Customers are then more likely to return and to refer other customers to the place where the memorable experience met their expectation (Young-Joong, 2015). The findings of this research may interest all employees within a retail environment – especially those directly charged with providing customer experience.

Retail managers must intentionally and systematically adopt strategies which build and sustain customer experience (Sachedva & Goel, 2015). This approach will serve to customize strategies which build and sustain customer relationships. Overtime,

these relationships assist in improving and expanding customer loyalty. Some of these strategies may revolve around providing enhanced levels of customer service, improving store aesthetics/ambience, increasing in-store promotions, bolstering employee training, and so on.

The following are other recommendations for action in formulating strategies that assist in building brand loyalty and improving customer experience:

1. Provide convenience that simplifies customers' lives. Customers want to fulfill their shopping needs in the least complicated manner (Czarniewski, 2014). Providing shopping convenience is paramount to optimizing customer experience. The merchandising of product must be logical and thematic. Planograms must reflect seasonality – Christmas, Hurricane season, Jazz festival, Easter, and so on. Endcaps and floor displays must generate excitement and add value to the shopping experience.
2. The retail establishment should institute online shopping or an online method where customers can select and pay for items online and collect their merchandise at the store. This will serve as an avenue to modernize and differentiate product offerings. This is also crucial to providing shopping convenience and providing additional options to customers.
3. Interact with customers using the communication channels with which they are comfortable. Retail managers may have to spend more time on the sales floor developing customer relationships. Marketing specialists

should embark upon more sensitization campaigns on the benefits of loyalty cards and in-store promotions.

4. Provide an online presence where customers can offer opinions, make suggestions, and provide reviews. Act promptly on customer feedback. Designate a team to expeditiously convey responses and act upon suggestions. Perform periodic customer surveys as a tool for determining the effectiveness of current strategy and for ascertaining feedback from customer base. Customer suggestion forms are archaic and customers may not fully trust the veracity and confidentiality of the process.
5. Show customers that they are important and valued throughout the customer experience survey.
6. Keep up with emerging customer communication modes and preferences for customer experience feedback. Use technology to build brand loyalty and optimize customer experience. Websites should offer opportunity for customers to rate their experience and offer feedback.
7. Ensure that the formulation of customer experience and customer loyalty strategy includes everyone. Since the concept of customer experience is a broad-based and personal concept, everyone from top executives to cashiers, should have an input in designing successful strategy.
8. Immediately appoint a Customer Experience Manager. Both organizations (BUS1 and BUS2) had a Customer Service Manager or Front-End Manager, however, there was no Customer Experience Manager.

Customer service is a subset of customer experience, and primarily involves a connection with customers on a functional basis, not on an emotional or relational level.

9. All employees should be trained on the key facets of customer experience strategy and brand loyalty.
10. Consider the building of strategic alliances with local colleges and institutions to help with the costs of training employees.
11. Aggressively engage in community outreach campaigns to foster mutual trust with the citizenry. Work with vendors, stakeholders, and community groups, to pursue areas of interests within communities. For example, working with sports clubs to sensitize the populace on the need for healthy eating and exercise.

The results of this study may be used by retail managers to improve the business community and society through the implementation of effective strategy geared toward building brand loyalty and improving customer experience. The results of this study might be disseminated via peer reviewed electronic media, literary seminars, and scholarly business journals. Scholars and business professionals may find value in the results of this research study as an educational and training tool.

Recommendations for Further Research

The first limitation of this study was the limited size of 10 retail managers. This limitation could have been improved by increasing the research population and including similar establishments from other developing countries in the Caribbean region.

According to Robinson (2014) and Royset (2013), variances in research results are contingent upon the proportion of the sample size. Therefore, exploring strategies retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience should be conducted on a broader scale focusing on retail establishments across the Caribbean islands. Further empirical research can be performed by other DBA students with a similar scholarly research outline that relates to the business problem.

The second limitation was that participants have the right to withdraw at any juncture of the research. The occurrence of this limitation can be reduced but not eliminated altogether. If the researcher provides concrete incentives for research participants, the likelihood for participants to withdraw would be diminished. Future researchers should use quantitative method or mixed-methods model to perform in depth studies in other areas of customer experience and brand loyalty, such as, brand perception, customer engagement, and their linkage between customer experience and brand loyalty. Additional perspective on the business problem from a quantitative or mixed methods lens could contribute significantly the body of knowledge that already exists and may propel retail managers to formulate better action plans that could drive positive change and increase business opportunities.

Reflections

The objective of this study was to explore strategies retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. As I reflect on this academic sojourn, I revel in the ebbs and the flows of this intense process. I also reflect on the immortal words of Frederick Douglas “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” At times, the

workload appeared insurmountable, however, I persevered. Though there was constant realignment of my approach – had to redo the conceptual framework and change my topic altogether, I remained focused on the task at hand. A focus, which at times emanated from persistent support and encouragement from those closest to me – especially my wife. This process no matter how arduous, has equipped me with a tenacity and resolve that sometimes became obfuscated in the mire of modern day life. I could not have successfully reached the cusp of this journey, without the unchanging and everlasting love and support of my savior Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Customer experience is a broad concept which involves pre and post purchase decisions (Spanyi, 2014). The use of expedient customer experience strategy will attract, sustain, and grow customer loyalty. Retail managers must implement appropriate strategy which build brand loyalty and improve customer experience (Klaus & Maklan, 2013). The findings of this research study revealed that retail managers must fully understand the need to implement expedient strategies, which could build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. The findings also revealed that retail managers must understand the value of formulating customer experience strategy as a tool for product differentiation and for attaining or sustaining the competitive advantage.

Retail managers must perceive customer experience as a broad strategy which includes ambience, pricing, customer service, technology, training and so on, and not just as an individual strategy. For example, the enhancing of customer service, should be viewed as a subset in the broader customer experience strategy, and not as the entire

customer experience strategy. Retail managers must understand the need for appointing a customer experience manager and the role that this individual plays in aligning and realigning strategy with the broader operational, tactical, and strategic goals of the organization. Retail managers must consistently value the need for training all employees on the key facets of brand loyalty and customer experience. A failure to do so, could result in a loss of competitive advantage, loss of revenue, reduced customer loyalty, decreased profitability and close of business (Srivastava & Misra, 2014).

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Appendix A: Invitation Letter and Informed Consent for Participants over 18 Years of
Age

You are invited to participate in a research study about strategies retail managers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. I am inviting you to participate in the research study because you serve as: (a) managing director, (b) store manager, (c) assistant store manager, (d) merchandising manager, (e) front-end/customer service manager, and (f) floor manager. This form is part of a process known as *informed consent*, which will help you understand the basis of the study before you decide to participate.

A researcher known as Mekus D. Samuel, who is a doctoral student at Walden University, is conducting this study.

Background information:

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies which retailers use to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience. This proposed study may lead to a more profound understanding of customer experience strategies and its role in building brand loyalty.

Procedures:

Should you decide to participate in this study, you will be requested to do the following:

- Take part in a tape-recorded interview with the researcher, about customer experience strategies retail managers use to build brand loyalty. The interview will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes and you will be asked 7 questions. The interview will be conducted after normal working hours.
- Member check the data from the interview to ensure interpretations are accurate and your opinions were well documented. Member checking will last approximately 25 minutes.

The following are some sample questions the researcher will ask you during the interview:

1. What strategies are you using to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience?
2. How effective are these strategies at improving customer experience and fostering brand loyalty?
3. How do you use these strategies to gain the competitive advantage?

Voluntary nature of the study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can decline to answer any question. You also have the right to discontinue participation at anytime during the process.

Benefits and risks of participating in this study:

There are no known risks associated with this study. Please keep or print a copy of the consent form for your information. Your participation in this study may assist retail managers to implement or improve upon customer experience strategies as an avenue to building brand loyalty. Your participation in this research study may also contribute to positive social change by adding to a reservoir of working knowledge from which retail managers may gain a more profound understanding of customer experience strategies for building brand loyalty. This positive effect might result in enhanced sales revenue and profitability, which may foster increased employment for the youth and career advancement opportunities.

Compensation:

There will be no form of compensation, which includes thank you gifts for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

The information you provide for this research will be kept in strict confidence. All electronic information provided will be stored on a password protected external drive and non-electronic information will be secured in a safety deposit box for five years as mandated by the university.

Contacts and questions:

You may contact the researcher, Mekus Dylan Samuel, at 678-313-1151 or mekus.samuel@waldenu.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty mentor and

doctoral study chair, Dr. Gregory Uche, at 1-281-660-3348 or Gregory.Uche@waldenu.edu. Should you desire to discuss your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. Dr. Leilani Endicott is the Walden University representative who can provide in-depth information about your rights with you. Her phone number is 1-612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **10-12-17-0267190** and it expires on **10/11/2018**.

Statement of Consent:

I confirm I have read and understand the study well enough to make an informed decision about participating in this study. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", I understand I am agreeing to the terms outlined in the statements above.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol	
What I will do	What I will say – the script
<p>Start with Script - Introduce the interview and set the stage: in a room at a library to produce quality recording.</p> <p>Collect Consent Use audio recorders and brief note taking</p>	<p>Let me start by thanking you Mr. or Mrs. _____ for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Mekus Samuel and I am a doctoral student with Walden University.</p> <p>You were chosen to participate in this interview because of your role in determining or implementing strategy for building brand loyalty and improving customer experience.</p> <p>The interview will last between 30 to 40 minutes. I will be asking nine semistructured open-ended questions. The purpose of this study is to explore customer experience strategies retailers use to build brand loyalty. This is by no means an assessment of the strategies you use.</p> <p>Is it ok that I record this interview to ensure that I capture all the information provided? If you agree, can you read and sign the consent form? This interview is strictly confidential, and nothing you say here will be used in this research study to identify you or your organization. This audio recording will only be accessed by me and it, along with, any information gathered for this research, will be destroyed after five years. Do you choose to participate in this research study? Are there any other questions? Ok, then let us begin.</p>
<p>Identify non-verbal queues Paraphrase as required Ask follow-up questions to probe for more in-depth information</p>	<p>What strategies do you use to improve customer experience?</p> <p>Why are you using these customer experience strategies?</p> <p>How positive are these strategies in ensuring positive customer experiences and fostering brand loyalty?</p>

	<p>How can you improve these strategies to encourage positive customer experiences and build brand loyalty?</p> <p>How are these strategies unique to your store?</p> <p>How do you measure the success of customer experience strategies that you do implement?</p> <p>What are some of the customer experience training programs you use to improve employee skills?</p> <p>How effective are your customer experience training programs at building brand loyalty?</p> <p>What recommendations can you give to improve customer experience and build brand loyalty?</p>
<p>End interview with script: Let participant know how I will proceed from here and what to expect after the interview.</p>	<p>Thank you, Mr., Ms., or Mrs._____. I truly appreciated your time and the information that you provided for me. I will analyze your responses and schedule another interview in the coming days, to allow you an opportunity to verify responses.</p>
<p>Schedule member checking interview</p>	<p>When will you be available to review your responses?</p>
<p>Member Checking Follow-up Interview</p>	
<p>Introduce follow-up interview - handshake</p>	<p>Hi Mr., Ms., or Mrs._____ Pleasure to see you again and thanks for your time once again. As I mentioned in our last interview, this interview is an opportunity to allow you to review my interpretation of your responses. This interview will be no longer than 20 minutes. May we begin?</p>
<p>Provide participant a copy of the synthesized individual questions</p>	<p>These are the questions and synthesis of interpretations Please feel free to elaborate or change as needed.</p>
<p>Information must be</p>	<p>Question 1 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p>

<p>related and in accordance with the IRB approval. I will go through each question, provide my interpretation and ask the following: Did I leave out any information? Or, is there anything you would like to add?</p>	<p>Question 2 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 3 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 4 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 5 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 6 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 7 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more if required</p> <p>Question 8 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more required</p> <p>Question 9 and succinct synthesis of interpretation 1 paragraph or more required</p>
<p>Provide participant with copy of research results</p>	<p>Thanks once again for your time and information. Upon completion, I will provide you with a copy of the research results.</p>

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Participants will respond to the following questions:

1. What strategies are you using to build brand loyalty and improve customer experience?
2. How effective are these strategies at improving customer experience and fostering brand loyalty?
3. How do you use these strategies to gain the competitive advantage?
4. How do you measure the success of the strategies that you implement?
5. What are some of the customer experience training programs you use to improve employee skills?
6. How effective are your customer experience training programs at building brand loyalty?
7. What other information can you give to improve customer experience and build brand loyalty?

Appendix D: Letters of Cooperation from a Research Partner

Appendix D: Letter of Cooperation from a Research Partner

Community Research Partner Name: _____

Contact Information: _____

Date: 25.09.17

Dear Mekus D. Samuel,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Strategies Retailers Use to Build Brand Loyalty and Improve Customer Experience within the North. As part of this study, I authorize you to conduct interviews with potential participants, perform member checking and provide us with a copy of your research results. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include:

- Provide the researcher with contact information for the potential participants
- Participate voluntarily in an interview with the researcher regarding Strategies for Integrating Technological Innovations in Small Businesses
- Duration of interview will be 30-45 minutes
- The interview will be audio recorded to ensure data accuracy
- Participate voluntarily in a follow-up interview to ensure researcher's interpretation of data are accurate. The duration of this interview will be no longer than 20 minutes
- Voluntarily provide hard copy and digital company documents relating to technological integration process

We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the student's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely, _____

Contact Information

Appendix E: NIH Certificate

