

Exploring customer retention strategies implemented by managers in the fast-food industry: A post-pandemic perspective

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ABSTRACT

The fast-food industry is one of the most competitive industries in South Africa and is challenged by various factors such as fierce competition, high inflation rates, decreased customer spending, constant load shedding, and the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Against the backdrop of increasing challenges, it is concerning to note that customer loyalty within the industry is declining, which poses a problem for retaining customers. Consequently, managers in the industry are tasked with finding new or alternative ways to retain their customers. This article focuses on exploring the strategies that managers implement to improve customer retention in the fast-food industry.

A qualitative exploratory research design was implemented, and semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect the empirical data from 13 managers in the South African fast-food industry. Participants were selected using a combination of non-probability convenience and judgement sampling techniques. Atlas.ti was used to code the data, and the Morse and Field approach uncovered the strategies implemented by managers in the fast-food industry through categorical and thematic analysis.

The results indicate that for customers to be retained in the fast-food industry, the business should provide a differentiated experience to customers. Based on the results, it can be advised that to retain customers, fast-food restaurants should employ a differentiation strategy so that customers perceive their product offerings as more valuable or unique compared to competitors' offerings. Fast-food restaurants can do so by using high-quality ingredients, providing regular customer service training to employees, offering flawless service, and implementing a specialised menu as well as unique or personalised offers. Additionally, fast-food restaurants should also invest in the design of an attractive loyalty programme, alternative means of generating electricity (considering load shedding), and invest in their own delivery services. Implementing these strategies can help fast-food restaurants thrive in a highly competitive and challenging environment. In conclusion, the contribution of this research lies in the novel recommendations made to fast-food managers to employ a differentiation strategy to enhance customer retention in their industry after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Customer retention; customer satisfaction; customer loyalty; fast-food industry



1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about various challenges for economies and businesses alike. These included supply and demand disruptions, a decline in GDP growth, stock market volatility, and rising unemployment (Abrahám & Vošta, 2022:5; Brinca *et al.*, 2021:2; Wang *et al.*, 2021:2). The fast-food industry, in particular, had to navigate various health and safety protocols during the pandemic – affecting hours and modes of operation, the number of customers in the establishment, the service delivery process, and ultimately profit margins (Kim *et al.*, 2023:1; Ko *et al.*, 2023:701; Labben *et al.*, 2023:24). Consequently, fast-food restaurants implemented changes such as contactless collection and delivery, customer capacity limits in-store, layout adjustments for social distancing, and earlier closures to comply with curfews. As lockdown regulations began to ease, fast-food restaurants returned to their normal operating procedures (Cummins *et al.*, 2020:2-3; Villanueva *et al.*, 2023:1181).

Moreover, considering the South African landscape, the fast-food industry is severely impacted by the detrimental effects of load shedding, which results in increased operating expenses, increased risk of contamination due to the inability to refrigerate ingredients for a sustained period, and the challenge of maintaining product quality (Servest, 2023). Conversely, load shedding increases the number of sales at fast-food restaurants, since households are without electricity and cannot prepare meals (Fraser, 2023). This creates considerable pressure on fast-food restaurants to keep up with the increase in demand for their products during periods of power outages. Fast-food restaurants are also dependent on generators during load shedding, which increases the operational expenditure of the business (Marchetti-Merce, 2023:1). As a result, fast-food restaurants have opted to increase the price of their products to maintain their profit margins and competitiveness within the industry (Nkosi & Govender, 2022:142).

Furthermore, the industry is subject to changes in customer preferences and spending habits (Syafarudin, 2021:74; Waluya *et al.*, 2019:182), and challenges such as the continued increase in fuel prices and inflation are also affecting the profitability of fast-food restaurants (Habanabakize & Dickason-Koekemoer, 2021:24). Against this backdrop of intensifying challenges, it is concerning to note that customer loyalty in the fast-food industry is also declining, which significantly influences customer retention within the industry (Frederick *et al.*, 2020; Morris, 2020).

Since competition within the fast-food industry is fierce, customer retention is of vital importance (Ascarza *et al.*, 2018:67), and as such the survival of fast-food businesses lies in the relationship between the business, its customers, and the ability to retain customers (Hanaysha, 2018:1-2; Simanjuntak *et al.*, 2020:6). Therefore, managing customer retention and devising strategies to retain customers are critical for the longevity of fast-food restaurants, as retained customers will result in sales, positive word-of-mouth, and increased profits (Kwiatek *et al.*, 2020:1647; Ngoma & Ntale, 2019:2; Zhang *et al.*, 2019:34).

Anifowose *et al.* (2021:90) state that customer retention should be included in the core strategy of businesses seeking to gain a competitive advantage within an industry. Therefore, to remain competitive in the fast-food industry, restaurants should develop new or revised customer retention strategies (Zhong & Moon, 2020:1). The COVID-19 pandemic evidenced the need for such strategies in the fast-food industry where a growing demand for online ordering and contactless delivery were evident (Ghosh, 2020:646). Consequently, the industry experienced an increase in drive-through and delivery service sales (Cummins *et al.*, 2020:2-3).

Although customer retention has been extensively researched in the global fast-food industry (e.g., Dastane & Fazlin, 2017; Heiens *et al.*, 2019; Hidayat *et al.*, 2019; Sunaryo, 2019), few studies have been conducted from a South African perspective (e.g., Roberts-Lombard, 2009). However, the study of Roberts-Lombard (2009) that was conducted well before the pandemic only focused on three fast-food restaurants, and merely on their marketing strategies (i.e., customer relationship management, relationship marketing, and the role of technology in communication). Therefore, little to no research has been done on the customer retention strategies that are being implemented in the fast-food industry in South Africa after 2009, with even fewer after the pandemic. Most of the studies on customer retention were conducted from the customer's point of view, while limited studies focused on the management perspective. Therefore, the problem of paucity of knowledge related to customer retention strategies within the fast-food industry arises, and this article aims to close the knowledge gap by focusing on the customer retention strategies that managers implement in the fast-food industry of South Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Retaining customers is of pivotal importance for fast-food restaurants, as it increases the business' profitability through increased sales (Chanda & Kumar, 2021:6680; Wantara & Tambrin, 2019:3). However, retaining customers is not an easy task, since customers must first be satisfied with the products and services of the fast-food restaurant before they can be retained (Anees *et al.*, 2020:127). In the same vein, customer retention also depends on the loyalty of customers, since they are required to demonstrate a degree of loyalty before they can be retained (Albarq, 2023:2; Hamilton-Ibama & Elvis, 2022:31; Löffler, 2022:84). The subsequent literature review commences with an overview pertaining to the fast-food industry in South Africa. Thereafter, an overview of customer satisfaction and loyalty is provided, followed by an investigation of the concept of customer retention.

2.1 THE FAST-FOOD INDUSTRY OF SOUTH AFRICA

The fast-food industry refers to the categorisation of businesses that provide relatively inexpensive ready-to-eat meals that are produced quickly (Kenton, 2021; KPMG, 2016:1). These businesses, also known as restaurants, have standardised operating procedures for producing their products. Most fast-food restaurants focus on only producing a particular type of product (e.g., pizza and hamburgers) to accommodate the fast pace of their service delivery process (Pérez-Villarreal *et al.*, 2021:2). According to Thomas and Deshmukh (2019), processed chicken products constitute the most popular form of fast-food in South Africa. There are three main modes of serving fast-food products to customers, namely in-store sit-down, takeaway, and delivery (Hall, 2020:284). In-store sit-down refers to the mode by which a customer orders and consumes the product at the fast-food restaurant (Núñez-Fernández *et al.*, 2021:1; Singh *et al.*, 2021:1763). With takeaway, a customer orders the product at the establishment (either in the store or through a drive-through window that is accessible by car), but consumption occurs at a different location, mostly at the customer's residence (Chang *et al.*, 2020:3; Espinoza-Ortega, 2021:8). The delivery mode refers to when a customer uses means such as a telephone call, website, mobile application, or a third-party to place an order, and the food is then delivered to the customer's residence (Núñez-Fernández *et al.*, 2021:1; Trivedi *et al.*, 2023:2-4). Ensuring customer satisfaction is particularly challenging in this context, as customers, regardless of their preferred mode of service, must be satisfied with the products and services provided by the fast-food restaurant before they can be effectively retained (Anees *et al.*, 2020:127).

2.2 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

Customer satisfaction refers to the feeling of contentment that a customer experiences after their interaction with a business, product, or service (Hamzah & Shamsudin, 2020:2). To achieve customer satisfaction, a customer must have a favourable experience during his interaction, and this is determined by comparing the customer's experience with their expectations of the interaction (Mishra & Verma, 2023:162; Suchanek & Kralova, 2023:104). When customers perceive the interaction to surpass their expectations, a positive result is obtained and satisfaction is achieved; however, when the interaction does not meet the customer's expectations, dissatisfaction occurs (Lin *et al.*, 2020:1971; Lucini *et al.*, 2020:1). This assessment can be based on a single service interaction or the accumulation of interactions over an extended period between a customer and a business. The former results in transaction-specific satisfaction, whilst the latter leads to cumulative satisfaction (Jong *et al.*, 2022:4). Ensuring that both types are achieved is imperative for fast-food restaurants, because to retain a customer during their first interaction with the fast-food restaurant, the customer should be satisfied with the interaction (Nyan *et al.*, 2020:15; Xu, 2022:3). In the same vein, to foster loyalty and retain regular customers, the business must consistently ensure that customers are satisfied over a series of interactions (Suchanek & Kralova, 2023:104). There are three main antecedents relevant to the attainment of customer satisfaction in the fast-food industry, namely product and service quality, the value proposition offered, and the appeal of the business and its offerings (Ghoumrassi & Tıgu, 2017:295).

2.2.1 Product and service quality

The quality of products and services provided by a fast-food restaurant is an essential determinant of customer satisfaction and, ultimately, customer retention (Iqbal *et al.*, 2023:11). Product quality refers to the perceived performance of the product in terms of its ability to meet customer requirements and its conformance to certain standards (Mappesona *et al.*, 2020:593). Therefore, the quality of a fast-food product is encapsulated in the degree to which its perceived performance satisfies expectations (Mulyandi & Tjandra, 2023:4). Customers have an inherent preference, *ceteris paribus*, to select a product with higher quality among a variety of alternatives (Syafarudin, 2021:74). According to Waluya *et al.* (2019:182), this preference is evidenced in the fast-food industry, whereby customers regard the freshness of food as a key indicator of superior product quality. It is worth noting that an exclusive focus on product quality is futile if the quality of services is neglected (Boonlertvanich, 2019:294). Fast-food managers should ensure that the quality of the services they provide is superior to that of their competitors', which will add additional value in the customer's interaction with the business, resulting in elevated levels of customer satisfaction (Al-Omari *et al.*, 2020:843).

Consequently, service quality is of prodigious importance for highly competitive fast-food restaurants which are expected to provide exceptional service (Ascarza *et al.*, 2018:67). This can be achieved by constantly improving service delivery processes – dimensions within these processes include tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy (Biswas & Verma, 2023:501). Tangibility refers to the attractiveness of the physical attributes (e.g., building, equipment, facilities, etc.) (Juan & Nair, 2022:39). Reliability is the precision and consistency of the fast-food restaurant service delivery (Trang, 2022:379), and responsiveness encompasses the willingness of the fast-food restaurant's employees to assist the customer, along with their promptness in doing so (Trivedi *et al.*, 2023:413). Assurance involves the ability of employees to relay a level of confidence and trust to customers during the service interaction, while empathy relates to the individualised attention provided by the fast-food restaurant employees (Arafa & Eltobgy, 2022:76). In essence, product and service quality are not only intertwined and complementary to one another, but also have a direct effect on customer satisfaction (Susanti & Jasmani, 2019:75).

2.2.2 Value proposition

The foundation of customer satisfaction lies in the ability of a business to meet customer expectations with the product or service that it provides in an interaction (Hamzah & Shamsudin, 2020:2). The perceived value (i.e., benefits outweigh cost) that can be obtained from the interaction will affect the satisfaction of a customer (Matsuoka, 2022:140). A fast-food restaurant should ensure that customers perceive the interaction and product to be of greater value than that offered by competitors. Indubitably, the value proposition of a fast-food restaurant is a key antecedent to customer satisfaction, which ultimately influences customer retention (Hamzah & Shamsudin, 2020:2).

2.2.3 Appeal of the business and its offerings

Similar to the attractiveness of the service attributes, the physical appeal of the business and its offerings (i.e., products) also play an integral role in sustaining customer satisfaction. According to Rajput and Gahfoor (2020:3) as well as Wu *et al.* (2021:2), the facade and design of the fast-food restaurant's building is one of the most prominent factors in attracting new and returning customers to the business. Therefore, the objective of a fast-food restaurant is to ensure that the business facilities are in good condition, the interior decorations are attractive, and that cleanliness is maintained within the establishment (Liew *et al.*, 2021:6). Customers also consider the products of the appearance of the fast-food restaurant as a determinant of their satisfaction with a fast-food restaurant (Müller & Schmid, 2019:1).

Customer satisfaction is a key ingredient for the survival of a fast-food restaurant serving a market with ever-changing needs and operating in a highly competitive industry (Ascarza *et al.*, 2018:67), amidst threats such as load shedding (Mishi *et al.*, 2023:11) and inflation (Hady *et al.*, 2021:3). Undeniably, satisfied customers are more advantageous for a fast-food restaurant than dissatisfied customers, as they will have higher levels of trust and loyalty, which ultimately results in their retention (Nashwan & Hassan, 2017:101; Trini & Salim, 2018:112).

2.3 CUSTOMER LOYALTY

The loyalty of a customer is attained by consistently satisfying a customer through a series of encounters (Albarq, 2023:2; Löffler, 2022:84). Customer loyalty has been achieved once a customer returns and will continue to return to a business for a particular product or service (Sitanggang *et al.*, 2019:29). Some customers may be satisfied with the products or services of a business, but may not remain loyal to the business; therefore, customer loyalty is critical to customer retention within the fast-food industry (Wolter *et al.*, 2017:458). The attitude and behaviour of the customer are considered the main building blocks of customer loyalty (Leninkumar, 2017:451), and to improve customer retention, fast-food restaurant managers must understand and assess the attitudinal and behavioural loyalty of their customers (Zhang *et al.*, 2019:34).

2.3.1 Attitudinal loyalty

Attitudinal loyalty refers to the customer's intention to make repeat purchases from a business in the future as well as their desire to spread positive word-of-mouth about the business (Kwiatek *et al.*, 2020:1647; Ngoma & Ntale, 2019:2; Zhang *et al.*, 2019:34). Attitudinal loyalty is concerned with the emotional bond that is formed between the customer and the business (Saini & Singh, 2020:207). For this reason, it is imperative that businesses differentiate themselves from the competition so that customers can distinguish between the business and a competitor (Sudiyono *et al.*, 2022:630). To better understand how attitudinal loyalty can be increased, managers must first analyse current attitudes toward the business by understanding customers' overall satisfaction with the business (Kuchinka *et al.*, 2018:2), as it is the basis for customer loyalty (Wolter *et al.*, 2017:459). Customers with high levels of attitudinal loyalty will purchase non-promotional products and are not affected by an increase in the price of products, which places attitudinal loyalty as a central dimension of customer loyalty in the fast-food industry (Shammout, 2020:224). Furthermore, the non-managerial staff involved in the service encounter should exhibit high levels of professionalism and excel in customer service, as this will increase the attitudinal loyalty towards the fast-food restaurant (Agyeiwaah & Dayour, 2021:352).

2.3.2 Behavioural loyalty

Behavioural loyalty refers to the frequency at which customers will make repeat purchases from a business (Zhang *et al.*, 2019:34). Customers with an increased intention to make repeat purchases and exhibit a more positive attitude towards the business will also make more frequent purchases from the business (Saini & Singh, 2020:207; Wolter *et al.*, 2017:459). Therefore, a customer is more inclined to make repeat purchases from a business when they are emotionally attached to the business, and as a result behavioural loyalty benefits from the existence of attitudinal loyalty (Soedarto *et al.*, 2019:2) – as the basis of behavioural loyalty is attitudinal loyalty (Wolter *et al.*, 2017:459). Behavioural loyalty directly affects the profitability of a fast-food restaurant, since the more repeat purchases a customer makes, the higher the number of sales and profit will be (Inoue *et al.*, 2017:46). Customers may exhibit higher levels of behavioural loyalty due to a dislike of change or ongoing promotions (Saini & Singh, 2020:207). Lower levels of behavioural loyalty may result from social factors, which include, inter alia, influences from friends and family (Izquierdo-Yusta *et al.*, 2022:3). Similar to attitudinal loyalty, customer satisfaction also influences their behavioural loyalty (Dikcius *et al.*, 2019:97). Conclusively, managers of fast-food restaurants must devise strategies to increase the behavioural loyalty of their customers by identifying how their frequency of repeat purchases can be increased (Lin *et al.*, 2018:3).

2.4 CUSTOMER RETENTION

A retained customer refers to an individual that exhibits a certain level of loyalty towards a business whereby he/she will continue to return to the business for future interactions, as the business is regarded as their preferred option to satisfy a certain want or need (Hamilton-Ibama & Elvis, 2022:31). Thus, customer retention relates to the activities performed by a business and the strategies it implements to encourage repeat purchase behaviour and foster a strong and long-term relationship between the business and the customer (Hanaysha, 2018:1-2; Simanjuntak *et al.*, 2020:6). To do so, the business will provide an interaction with high-quality products and services that will

continuously exceed the customer's expectations (Anees *et al.*, 2020:127). Due to the intense rivalry within the fast-food industry, customer retention is a top priority for fast-food restaurants, as retaining customers has more economic advantages than acquiring new customers (Yu *et al.*, 2021:3). Customer retention will therefore allow a business to increase its sales, leading to increased profitability (Hossain *et al.*, 2017:928). However, retaining customers is not an easy task, since customers and their preferences differ from one another (Farooqui & Alwi, 2019:57). Therefore, managers of fast-food restaurants should ensure that customer retention strategies have a degree of personalisation and customisation (Ascarza *et al.*, 2018:71).

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research primarily focuses on exploring the customer retention strategies implemented by fast-food managers to improve customer retention within the fast-food industry. Accordingly, the following secondary objectives are posited:

- To explore fast-food managers' awareness of customer retention.
- To identify the customer retention challenges experienced by fast-food managers.
- To identify strategies that fast-food managers implement to retain customers.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLING

This research followed a qualitative exploratory research design. This design was chosen as it allowed the authors to explore fast-food restaurant managers' perception on customer retention within the fast-food industry, as well as to explore the different strategies that enhance customer retention within the industry. In addition, the qualitative exploratory research design was considered an appropriate design for this research, given the limited context of customer retention strategies in the South African fast-food industry, which enabled the study to collect new information. The target population consisted of managers of fast-food restaurants in the North West province of South Africa. Since no sample frame was available, the targeted participants were selected through a combination of non-probability convenience and judgement sampling methods. Convenience sampling was used for accessibility to the target population within the North West province, and judgement sampling was used to ensure that participants were indeed managers of fast-food restaurants.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

To collect the data for this research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used. This data collection method was chosen so that open-ended responses from the participants could be obtained. Therefore, the use of a semi-structured interview allowed the study to gain an in-depth understanding of customer retention in the fast-food industry, as managers provided their individual perspectives relating to the unique challenges they face, and the strategies they implement to retain customers. Before an interview was scheduled with a manager, they had to provide their informed consent by signing a consent letter. The consent letter contained the necessary information pertaining to the interview, such as their right to withdraw from the interview at any time, how their data will be used, and how their confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained throughout the process. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured since no personal information was requested from participants, and their responses were recorded according to an assigned participant number. Ethical clearance to conduct the research was also obtained from a faculty ethics committee of a local university.

The interview guide commenced with an introduction, whereafter questions relating to participants' perspectives of customer retention were asked. This was followed by a section that focused on the manager's awareness of customer retention. The next section focused on the challenges managers faced in the fast-food industry, whereafter they were asked about the strategies they used to retain customers. The interview concluded by thanking participants for their

time and availability to participate in the interview. The data was collected between September and October 2022, and the interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes each. The point of diminishing return (i.e., saturation) was attained upon interviewing the 11th participant; however, for validation of the data saturation point, two more interviews were conducted – realising a final sample size of 13 participants.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

Categorical and thematic analysis was used as the data analysis method for this research. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription business and analysed in accordance with the four stages of the Morse and Field approach, namely comprehension, synthesis, theorising, and recontextualisation. In the comprehension stage, the extant literature and interview transcripts were reviewed numerous times, after which the data was coded accordingly. During synthesis, inter-participant analysis was used to compare the interview transcripts of several participants with those of all participants, and category analysis was subsequently used to create categories of the data. The third stage, theorising, involved comparing the empirical data with the extant literature reviewed insofar as to understand the data and theorise any reasons for a discrepancy. The final stage, recontextualisation, involved elaborating upon the theories of the previous stage to determine the application of customer retention strategies in the fast-food industry. Furthermore, the line-by-line analysis of the Morse and Field approach (1996:104) was deployed to code the data, and the Atlas.ti (version 22) software programme was used for coding, categorisation, and thematic analysis.

4.3.1 Reliability and validity (trustworthiness)

Reliability and validity were assessed in terms of the trustworthiness of the data, and was determined by implementing the four criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1981), which include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member check, and triangulation. Transferability was established via thick description as well as purposive sampling, whilst dependability was established through peer debriefing and audit trails. Finally, confirmability was established through audit trails and triangulation insofar as to minimise bias or errors during the data collection process.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides the results and discussion of the in-depth interviews analysed.

5.1 SECONDARY OBJECTIVE 1: FAST-FOOD MANAGERS' AWARENESS OF CUSTOMER RETENTION

Most participants (10 of 13) regard retained customers as the key to increased revenue, since retained (i.e., regular and loyal) customers are more likely to spend more money at their fast-food restaurant. This is in congruence with the literature on customer retention, in which it was mentioned that retained customers will lead to increased sales – ultimately resulting in greater profits (Parawansa, 2018:54). On the other hand, some of the participants (3 of 13) suggested that retained customers and new customers are of equal importance for revenue generation, since new customers will become retained customers if they receive superior quality products and services. Additionally, most of the participants interviewed (9 of 13) stated that it is easier to satisfy the needs of retained customers, as they are familiar with the quality of the service delivery process. As a result, rectifying any product or service delivery errors, should they arise, becomes significantly easier. Most of the participants recognised that word-of-mouth plays an important role in customer retention. Furthermore, most of the participants indicated that daily meetings are held between them and their employees, in which the importance of producing high-quality products and providing excellent service during the interaction is highlighted. Subsequently, most of the participants regard regular training to employees as an essential part to be able to deliver an interaction that will satisfy customer needs and encourage repeat purchase behaviour. Regular employee training was also identified in the reviewed literature (Kurdi *et al.*, 2020:3567). This is further evidenced by the popular mantra of service businesses, 'the customer is

always right', which signifies the importance of providing superior quality products and excellent customer service, since employees are the ones responsible for providing both. Therefore, well-trained and competent employees are essential to keep customers. The awareness of customer retention was highlighted by participants as follow *"If your regular customers don't come back, you can actually see a drop in your turnovers"* (Participant 1).

"If we don't have returning customers you don't get that money back that they used to spend here" (Participant 3).

"I think your returning customer will spend a lot more money in your restaurant, where your new customers will first try a few things out" (Participant 6).

"I think returning is more important with regards to revenue, definitely" (Participant 6).

"Sales are lost, which equals a profit loss" (Participant 11).

5.2 SECONDARY OBJECTIVE 2: CUSTOMER RETENTION CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED BY FAST-FOOD MANAGERS

Most of the participants (8 of 13) stated that the provision of average or poor-quality products and services is the main reason that customers do not return to their fast-food restaurant. This finding is in accord with the literature where it was posited that product and service quality has a direct influence on customer loyalty and, subsequently, customer retention (Al-Gharaibah, 2020:3951; Parawansa, 2018:54). Six of the 13 participants indicated that providing above-average quality and service remains a challenge for them in such a competitive industry. However, for most participants the main challenge relates to the financial capacity of customers to frequent the fast-food restaurant on a regular basis. The COVID-19 pandemic was an immense challenge for the fast-food industry, and even after the pandemic receded it remained a challenge for most of the participants to return to full functionality (pre-COVID levels). Furthermore, some participants (4 of 13) stated that they had to revisit and restructure their business model after the pandemic to realise sales and remain profitable. Additional challenges mentioned by the participants include fierce competition in the fast-food industry, limited operational capacity to produce a variety of different products, changing customer preferences and needs, and the electricity crisis (i.e., load shedding) in South Africa. The challenges experienced in the industry were highlighted by participants as follows:

"The fast-food industry it is so competitive, it is extremely competitive" (Participant 1).

"Quality of the product" (Participant 2).

"The food might be a bit slow, so it takes sometimes too long" (Participant 5).

"...load shedding..." (Participant 10).

"Bad customer service" (Participant 13).

5.3 SECONDARY OBJECTIVE 3: STRATEGIES THAT FAST-FOOD MANAGERS IMPLEMENT TO RETAIN CUSTOMERS

Most of the participants (9 of 13) stated that their main strategy implemented to improve customer retention is related to the provision of unique and excellent quality products with exceptional customer service compared to others in the industry. To do so, most participants stated that they implement loyalty programmes, whilst others focused on uniquely positioning their brand in the market through different marketing campaigns. There was also a commonality between most of the participants in the implementation of regular promotions and specials. Some of the participants

stated that their customer retention strategy is related to their ability to be operational during load shedding, which serves as a competitive advantage for them. Some participants (4 of 13) also indicated that they have implemented delivery services since the advent of the pandemic, and will continue to do so after the pandemic. This is further evident whereby a few have opted to make use of third-party delivery services. Several participants stated that their marketing strategy was adapted to a more online environment to differentiate them from other fast-food restaurants. The strategies implemented in the industry were highlighted by participants as follows:

“Make sure the quality is better” (Participant 1).

“We’ve also got a loyalty card” (Participant 9).

“I have specials on certain days” (Participant 7).

“We are open during load shedding” (Participant 10).

“...doing deliveries” (Participant 13).

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

- If fast-food restaurants invest in high-quality ingredients and customer-centric service, the implication is that they could see an increase in customer satisfaction and loyalty, resulting in potentially higher revenue through repeat purchases.
- By focusing on monitoring the frequency of customer visits and the associated expenditure of their visits, fast-food restaurants may gain valuable insights into customer behaviour. The implication of this is that by implementing a loyalty programme and employing a targeted differentiation strategy, a fast-food restaurant offers a more personalised experience, which can result in an increase in revenue, as it allows for premium pricing.
- Specialising menus to reflect high-demand items implies that fast-food restaurants can streamline operations and inventory. This could lead to cost savings, reduced waste, and improved efficiency in food preparation – ultimately enhancing profit margins.
- Investing in alternative energy sources to counteract load shedding has to effect that fast-food restaurants can ensure uninterrupted service. By marketing that the fast-food restaurant is operational during load shedding, it implies that the business can establish an advantage over competitors, potentially attracting new customers.
- Regular training for employees with the mantra ‘the customer is always right’ implies that the fast-food restaurant values customer satisfaction highly, which leads to enhanced service quality, resulting in a positive experience that could differentiate the restaurant from its competitors.
- Offering contactless delivery without additional costs to customers suggests that fast-food restaurants are adapting to new consumer preferences post-pandemic. This implication is that they can cater to a broader customer base, including those who prioritise convenience and safety, which could expand the business’ market share and its customer retention efforts.
- Maintaining regular contact with customers through targeted marketing efforts has the implication that the fast-food restaurant can enhance customer loyalty by focusing on building a community around their brand. This can result in an increase of sales, more retained customers, and ultimately higher profits.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results can potentially be useful for managers in the fast-food industry who want to improve customer retention within their business. Subsequently, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Fast-food restaurants should invest in the quality of the products they offer their customers and the service related to the interaction. Specifically, product quality can be improved by sourcing high-quality ingredients and ensuring that the products are freshly prepared. Regarding service quality, fast-food restaurants should adopt a customer-centric approach whereby the quality of the service interaction is enhanced. This can be achieved by ensuring that employees are well-trained and well-presented to provide effective and efficient service to customers, so that customers receive superior services in comparison to competitors' services.
2. Managers of fast-food businesses should invest in monitoring the frequency at which customers visit the establishment and how much they spend per interaction. This can be done by implementing a loyalty programme that offers unique and added value to customers. Additionally, a focused differentiation strategy can also be implemented in which a specific market segment is targeted, and provided with unique or personalised offers that are only valid for a limited time and redeemable only through the loyalty programme. By consistently implementing a differentiation strategy, a fast-food restaurant could sell unique/differentiated products at an increased price, which will serve as their competitive advantage.
3. The challenge of having limited operational capacity to produce a variety of products can be curbed by designing a specialised menu based on identifying the products that are most in demand – this will enable the fast-food restaurant to reduce its inventory levels, which will also reduce costs.
4. To overcome the current electricity crises (i.e., load shedding) the country is facing, fast-food restaurants should invest in the acquisition of a generator or alternative energy sources such as solar power. Furthermore, the fast-food restaurant should ensure that it markets the fact that they are operational during load shedding (i.e., power outages).
5. To ensure the delivery of a flawless service, it is necessary for fast-food restaurant employees to understand the mantra 'the customer is always right'. Regular customer service training will enable employees to provide exceptional service during an interaction.
6. The pandemic has prompted many customers to prefer contactless delivery of fast-food products at their residence. Consequently, fast-food restaurant managers should ensure that they offer customers the option (mode) to have their food delivered, either through their own delivery services or through a third-party. Given the challenge of limited financial capacity, it is recommended that fast-food delivery do not incur additional costs to the customer, as this will aid the differentiation strategy of the fast-food restaurant.
7. To further aid fast-food restaurants in the implementation of a differentiation strategy, it is recommended that the business maintains regular contact with their customer base engaged in loyalty programmes by informing them of changes in operating times and special or limited time (i.e., exclusive) offers. Therefore, fast-food restaurants should use targeted marketing channels such as mobile marketing and mobile applications to communicate with the customer.

8. LIMITATIONS

The following limitations affected the process and findings of the research:

Since this research was qualitative, its sample comprised a small number of participants. The qualitative approach also resulted in some jargon being used by participants, which is evidenced by the verbatim quotes. Cost and time constraints prevented this research from using probing questions and conducting follow-up interviews with participants to gain further insight into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since all the participants were also managers at fast-food restaurants, they had limited time to be interviewed. This had the effect that the interview guide needed to be within a certain time limit.

9. CONCLUSION

This research set out to explore customer retention strategies implemented by managers in the fast-food industry. This purpose was achieved, since the results indicated that managers are aware of the importance of customer retention and that most of them implement a differentiation strategy – whether in terms of unique products or promotions, additional modes (e.g., deliveries), or exceptional service experiences to address contemporary challenges. To improve customer retention in the industry, fast-food restaurants should focus on adopting a differentiation strategy as part of their product or service offerings by implementing the recommendations provided. Fast-food restaurants can also gain more insight into customer retention by collecting data from a larger population and using other research designs (e.g., quantitative questionnaires). Limitations of this research included the small sample size (because of using a qualitative approach), the unavailability of a sample frame, as well as time and cost constraints which prevented probing or follow-up interviews. Future research directions could include collecting data from fast-food restaurant employees to gauge their understanding of customer retention, as well as their challenges in retaining customers.

In conclusion, fast-food restaurants are still not in the clear after the COVID-19 pandemic to retain their customers, and have a long way to go to achieve customer loyalty, since customers expect a unique and differentiated offering from these establishments. Substandard customer retention strategies remain a key challenge within the fast-food industry, as it prevents businesses in the industry from truly differentiating themselves from the competition, retaining customers, and benefiting from the associated advantages.

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