Competing in the Internet Era, Enhancing Brand Image and Brand Loyalty through Customer Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to examine the relationship between perceived employee boundary spanning behaviour, online service quality, mobile application usability, brand loyalty and brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement within the restaurant business in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted using survey questionnaires which were distributed electronically and was analysed using probability sampling. The data for this thesis was collected from mainly individuals using mobile applications to order food online from restaurants and employed the quantitative research methodology for the investigation. Data was collected from different nationalities including Angola, Botswana, British, Cameroonian, Congo, Cypriot, Ghana, Kenya, KSA, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigerian, South African, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The data measurement model for this study was conducted using Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (FsQCA). The researcher employed few practical procedures and cautious measures in order to address common bias method. The results of this study show that there is a positive correspondence between perceived employee boundary span behaviour, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. In addition to this, the research shows that there is a positive interrelation between online service quality, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. Furthermore, the study also showed that there a positive correlation between mobile application design, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement as well as a positive relationship between mobile application functionality, brand loyalty and brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement.

Keywords: brand image, brand loyalty, customer engagement.

ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı rol ötesi davranışlar, çevrimiçi hizmet kalitesi ve mobil uygulama kullanılabilirliğinin tüketicilerin marka sadakati ve marka imajı üzerinde etkili olup olmadığını ortaya koymaktır. Buna ek olarak, yukarıdaki ilişkiye ek olarak, müşteri katılım davranışının aracılık rolü araştırılmıştır. Çalışmada, rol ötesi davranışlar, çevrimiçi hizmet kalitesi ve mobil uygulama kullanılabilirliğinin tüketicilerin marka sadakati ve marka imajı üzerinde etkili olup olmadığını incelenirken konfigürasyon bakış açısı benimsenmiş, araştırma verileri Angola, Botswana, Birleşik Krallık, Kamerun, Kongo, Kıbrıs, Gana, Kenya, Saudi Arabistan, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mozambik, Namibya, Nijerya, Güney Afrika, Swaziland, Tanzanya, Uganda, Zambiya and Zimbabve' de bulunan toplamda 392 kişiden toplanmıştır.. Ayrıca, değişkenler arasındaki ilişki bulanık mantık nitel karşılaştırma analizi (fsQCA) ile analiz edilmiştir. Bulanık mantık nitel karşılaştırma analizi sonucunda rol ötesi davranışlar, çevrimiçi hizmet kalitesi ve mobil uygulama kullanılabilirliğinin tüketicilerin marka sadakati ve marka imajı üzerinde anlamlı ve pozitif etkisi olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Buna ek olarak, rol ötesi davranışlar, çevrimiçi hizmet kalitesi ve mobil uygulama kullanılabilirliğinin tüketicilerin marka sadakati ve marka imajı arasındaki ilişkide müşteri katılım davranışının aracılık rolü saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Marka imaji, marka sadakati, müşteri katılım davranışı.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my parents,

who are always there to pick me up when l fall,

strengthen and support me spiritually,

emotionally and financially continuously.

To my daughter Manna, my reason to keep pushing no matter how difficult life gets.

To my sister Tsungai, who wipes my tears and wanted this achievement for me just as much as I did.

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who continually assisted, supported and encouraged me to complete this study during these tough covid times.

Above all, I dedicate this to God for the guidance,

strength, skills, health and the gift of life.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

COVID-19 has had a devastating global impact, decimating millions within a short space of time. Strict measures were implemented at both state and local level in order to curtail the spread of the virus. While travel restrictions and border control measures were imposed at federal level, local governments enforced physical distancing orders, closing of education institutions, closing of enterprises which are not vital, movement restrictions and banned restaurants dine-in services at community level, all in an effort to minimize personal interaction. A movement restriction is "an enforceable executive order from the government, mandating that people stay home as a mass quarantine strategy to control a disease outbreak" (NBC Chicago, 2020). This latter point had a dramatic effect on the hospitality industry. Due to the high level of human interaction within a relatively enclosed and supposedly less ventilated space, restaurant dining is associated with high perceived personal susceptibility considering the highly infectious nature of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, while these interventions were indeed designed to save lives, it is unfortunate that their implementation threatened the survival of the very restaurant industry in several ways.

To begin with, actions and decisions by government greatly influenced how the general public views risk (Dube et al. (2020; Viscusi, 1995), thereby creating panic and consternation in the general population. Secondly, the stay-ins, restrictions placed on movement and the closure of businesses in the hospitality and tourism sector such as restaurant resulted in the demand for dine-in decreasing sharply. Dube et al. (2020) adds that by March 2020, due to strict lockdown policies, this decrease had reached an all-time low for many countries. Dine in restaurants, a phenomenon which had been deeply embedded in the social fabric and culture of many countries, were now deemed to be nonessential businesses, thereby dramatically reducing the demand for restaurant services as well as the availability of employees to work in these establishments (Maghdid and Ghafoor, 2020). The sharp decline was attributed to pay cut in many jobs, coupled by the forced vacation and redundancy of workers further inhibited individuals' non-essential consumption patterns, of which, restaurant patronization was one. Thirdly, it is imperative to note that an epidemic crisis can spawn other crises (Karamustafa, 2005; Tse et al., 2006). Thus, the COVID 19 pandemic's ripple effects escalated into related financial and other economic crises.

In order to both sustain and grow their businesses during this constraining operational environment, restaurant corporates and owners were forced to reconsider their customer engagement strategies. Customer engagement is any interaction between a company and any external consumer/customer via various online or offline channels. Van Doorn et al. (2010) proposes that level of customer engagement is a byproduct of the interplay between customer (objectives, attributes, predispositions, emotional states, resources etc.), the firm (brand, policies, operational models etc.) and context-based factors (overall macro-operational environment). Sashi (2012) also argues that customer engagement has a direct link with other core business outcomes such as buyer-seller relationships, customer purchase and loyalty.

In order to be effective, customer engagement must be a disciplined strategy with ownership, accountability, broad reach, goals, measures and a marketing plan of its own to communicate with employees, customers, and other stakeholders (Bingham, 2013). A 2017 Forbes Insights Review revealed that industry leaders believe that engaging and delighting customers should achieve financial objectives and lead to purchases. Meanwhile, followers focus on outbound communications without focusing on the financial benefits of the engagement strategy.

In this constrained operational context, restaurant operators reengineered their business models in order to engage customers through providing services with minimal contact such as drive-through and online delivery services, strategies which ensured minimum physical contact between customers and the organizations. However, these emergency response services provided fast food restaurants an advantage provided that they already had the relevant digital technology synced with infrastructure such has as ‘drive-thru’ windows. Yet those businesses that had made massive infrastructural investments towards providing full dine-in services showed their inability to adapt quickly to an ever changing environment, eventually leading them to suffer a massive economic loss (Liddle, 2020; Sweet, 2020). It is with this hindsight that the growing use of digital communication technology has made online customer engagement an important part of the modern consumer experience in the hospitality industry. Social media has provided a new platform for businesses to inform, engage, and interact with their consumers, and it has become an essential component of effective company marketing (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

Although online service platforms and e-commerce seems to be a recent development, it is erroneous to assume it was precipitated by the COVID 19 Pandemic alone because online food delivery services have been around for quite some time. For instance, American restaurant Pizza Hut's, accepted and delivered the first online food delivery in 1994 (Pozzi, 2012). Since then, other restaurants followed suit and created their own websites for orders and delivery. Even grocery stores began offering online delivery in the early 21st century (Relihan, 2017). However, generalized online food delivery services that offer delivery from many different restaurants have become both an essential necessity and popular trend in the past decade- a trend that has happened at a very rapid pace. By 2018, the online food delivery service industry had an estimated $82 billion in gross revenue and accounted for 6 percent of the restaurant market in 2020 (Frost and Sullivan 2018; Morgan Stanley Research 2020). This rapid expansion has even influenced some restaurants to change their entire layouts, and migrate to a "delivery only" model (Bond 2019). Therefore, it is clear that COVID 19 s restrictions on restaurant market were not the cause of the e-commerce in the restaurant business, but rather, it only accelerated a global trend that had begun long before, right at the advent of the information age. It took its toll on the global population.

1.2 Rational

It is a justifiable endeavor to assess the impact of e-commerce on the restaurant business following the COVID 19 pandemic. While restaurant demand is influenced by numerous factors "such as food quality price location and online reviews crisis events represent an uncommon yet critical force" (Kwun and Oh, 2004; Namkung and Jang, 2007; Yang et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2016). Assessing online responses the pandemic is therefore imperative as it reviews a trend that will shape the future of the on the hospitality industry in the digital age and more importantly, in the post COVID 19 era.

E-commerce is taking over from traditional business approaches. Horta and Syverson (2015) argue that there has been a “retail apocalypse” in which e-commerce has forced brick and-mortar retail establishments without online channels to shut down. Although physical stores are not over, the hybrid of physical restaurant structures and online service delivery is a factor worth considering in the future of the hospitality industry. In this digital age, it is imperative to consider how companies will be able to compete and deliver stellar services through proficient customer engagement strategies. The COVID 19 pandemic may pass, but the changes it has wrought upon society and business operating models cannot be reversed at the same pace in which the changes were wrought to a point that the obtaining changes and challenges have now become the new normal. Understanding the current challenges will help restaurants to adapt and accurately predict and prepare for future changes, thereby helping economies to be globally abreast and remain competitive on the global marketplace.

This research will also contribute immensely to customer engagement research by providing information on how online service quality affects and influences perceived employee boundary spans and behavior. Furthermore, it will help to understand the different factors influencing the usability of mobile applications and how this influence and compel customers to engage with restaurant brands. More importantly, this research also has important practical implications for the food industry as it will promote the most effective ways of exercising online customer engagement, brand differentiation strategies in order to gain competitive advantage in this dynamic and fast paced industry.

1.3 Problem statement

The COVID 19 pandemic has dramatically changed restaurants' traditional operating systems. Customers are now required to sit in limited numbers, a meter apart and at certain times of the day. Patrons are now also required to produce a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, just in order to dine in. So strict have these measures been that in some instances, customers who come without PCR tests results are not able to eat. With restaurants operating below capacity and the demands on clients, this has directly affected establishments' profitability.

Against this background, it is evident that restaurants' profitability has been negatively affected by the pandemic. Yet, it remains unclear whether embracing e-commerce and online food delivery services 100 percent will effectively alleviate the financial quagmire. This comes in the backdrop that a survey of several thousand American restaurateurs showed that while online delivery services increased sales by 60 percent, the profitability of the restaurants is declining as online delivery increases (Technomic Food Trends 2018). This was mostly attributed to the high fees that online food delivery services charged to both the consumer and the restaurant. The survey also revealed that most online food delivery services charge the restaurant between 20-30 percent of each purchase (Dunn 2018; Thompson 2019). Thus, it remains questionable how restaurants will be able to rise from the financial ruin if the new main mode of operation i.e., online delivery is not as profitable as it is rosily predicted to be.

In addition, although opening new online platforms is projected to potentially increase restaurant revenues and cause overall market expansion, one wonders what will happen to the traditional offline methods of customer engagement. One wonders what would happen to the infrastructure that had been established to suit and maximize the benefits of dining in crowded restaurants. Even though firms face trade-off when introducing new products and services (Shaked and Sutton 1990; Holmes 2011; Mitsukuma 2012), it still remains important to consider what will happen to the business models that were characterized by in-person meal purchases, aspects that had left such an indelible mark on the global hospitality arena, yet which face the threat of being cannibalized by businesses offering online services.

More importantly, it remains questionable how the strategies of businesses offering online services will meet and satisfy customer demand while maintaining individual restaurant brand identity. Globally, brands like McDonalds are internationally recognized due to their massive investments in marketing and promoting the McDonalds experience. It now remains to be seen how local brands such as Beckett, Zagato, Rio Verde and Shamrock will promote their brand identity and compete in this cut throat industry. Since brand identity plays a big role in fostering both customer loyalty and customer retention, it is imperative to assess how online platforms will be able to differentiate brands and appeal to the desired and targeted patrons in such a highly competitive industry that has been opened to the global markets in the global village.

1.4 Purpose / Objectives

This study seeks to understand the relationship between perceived employee boundary spanning behavior, online service quality, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement in the restaurant business following the COVID 19 pandemic. While the use of mobile applications to order food for either collection or delivery has become necessary, it is important to constantly monitor the usability of online service platforms and how these impacts on service quality. With this in mind, as well as considering Prentice and Loureiro, (2017)'s study of consumers' psychological desire, perceived advantages and how social ideals impact their involvement with the brand and the organization, it is prudent to assess how customer engagement affects the customer's overall experience and how this leads to brand loyalty.

Considering the various consumer-based antecedents and attitudinal elements such as brand commitment and brand attachment; customer objectives, attributes, predispositions, emotional states, and resources (e.g., time, effort and money availability), it is important to ascertain how the interplay of these various factors will lead to effective sales as restaurants embrace online service delivery. This analysis is very important as it affects the company's overall bottom line since every strategy used in customer engagement should contribute to restaurants' revenue and their ultimate recovery from the COVID 19 induced business crisis.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is extensive literature on the relationship between customer engagement and brand loyalty and available research indicates that customer engagement enhances and has a positive effect on the development of brand loyalty (So et al, 2014; Rather et el, 2019). Scholars have also argued that in the tourism sector customer engagement is imperative for brand loyalty (Li et al, 2020). The abundancy of literature in this regard has provided a background for this research. However, to my knowledge there is no significant and extensive literature on the relationship between customer engagement and online service delivery especially within a context of pandemic therefore this review will seek to unpack the relationship between customer engagement and online service delivery, brand image and brand loyalty in the restaurant business following the COVID 19 pandemic.

Customer engagement has been defined as behavioral manifestations towards a business (Van Doom et al, 2010), this can also be defined as any interaction between customers and a business including the purchase of products and services offered by a business. Hollebeek (2011) states that customer engagement is the mutual interaction between customers and a brand and in relation to social media, customers engagement has been defined as customer's responses to business including liking, commenting and leaving reviews to a brand's social media posts (Chu et al, 2020). Bowden (2009) defined customer engagement as the process by which a consumer becomes loyal to a particular brand. Brand loyalty on the other hand has been defined as customers having positive attitudes towards a brand and therefore more amenable to purchasing products from that brand on a regular basis (Fullterton, 2003), brand loyalty has also been defined as a commitment to rebuy a preferred brand consistently in the future (Oliver, 1999).

Keller (1993) states that brand loyalty is the repeated purchase of a products or services from a particular brand. Some scholars have sought to break down brand loyalty even further arguing that that this can be viewed with regards to attitudinal and behavioral factors, the former being the psychological commitment to a brand whereas the latter being repeated purchase of a product or service (Gustafsso and Li, 2021) and where one of these factors is missing, brand loyalty cannot be said to exist (Joseph et al., 2020).

On the relationship between customer engagement and brand loyalty, there are studies which show that there is linkage between customer engagement and components of brand loyalty development (So et al, 2016) as well as the fact “that customer engagement enhances customers’ service brand evaluation, brand trust, and brand loyalty in tourism brands” (So et al, 2014). Social interactivity has a positive influence on customer engagement behavior and brand loyalty especially within the context of social media and online service delivery (Ting, 2020). In addition to this, Greve (2014) alludes that “active and passive engagement activity has an impact on brand loyalty and that the brand image is negatively moderated by engagement activity.” However, this research does analyse customer engagement over long timeframe and this might have an impact on the results of the study.

The view that customer engagement has a positive impact on brand loyalty is also supported by the study which finds that emotional bonds with consumers are likely to increased brand loyalty as opposed to costs or any other economic incentives (Evanschitzky, 2006) this study goes on to show that customer engagement which strikes an emotional connection with customers is likely to increase brand loyalty. However, this study could have had a different outcome if it analysed in more detail the diverse drivers of affective commitment.

Furthermore, having customers emotionally attached or committed to a brand has been shown to improve loyalty (Turri et al, 2013). This study did not effectively analyse the effect of consumer brand relationships on actual behaviour. Also, there is study whose findings reveal that developing a brand experience through affective commitment has an impact on customer loyalty (Iglesias, 2011). The limitations of this study which might have had an impact on these findings is that the data collected was only for three product categories and the results could be have enhanced by taking into account other brand loyalty determinants, such as brand trust and affect or customer satisfaction.

On the other hand, there are findings which show that customer engagement has no impact on brand loyalty, for instance, a study by Li et al (2020) finds that "customer engagement did not directly affect brand loyalty and it provides a crucial explanation of how customer engagement affects brand loyalty in the tourism social media domain. The findings showed that both brand attachment and customer trust fully mediated how customer engagement connected with brand loyalty" However, the findings of this study could have been impacted by the fact that the respondents of the study were Taiwanese women between 31 and 40 years and this might have limited the generalizability of the results to other populations.

2.1 COVID 19

There is a plethora of literature on the impact of COVID 19 on the restaurant industry throughout the globe; a study by Dube et al (2020) finds that the pandemic resulted in loss of employment and income within the restaurant industry. The study also reveals that the lockdowns instituted by different governments across the world saw restaurants sit-ins customers dropping to zero and as a result the loss of millions of dollars in revenues as well as jobs in the restaurant industry. Also, another study reveals that fine dining restaurants were the most hit by the pandemic followed by the fast-food restaurants which were mostly operating at less than 20 per cent capacity during the height of the pandemic. Additionally, the study reveals that due to the revenue and job losses, this also caused liquidity challenges within the restaurant industry (Nhamo et al, 2020).

It is clear that fast food restaurants did not suffer the same fate as fine dining restaurants, as fast food restaurants could easily move towards online food delivery services. Another long term impact of COVID 19 on the restaurant industry that has been cited is health and safety concerns moving forward, once the pandemic is over, it is predicted that customers will be more concerned with the hygiene and sanitation of restaurants (Lakshmi and Shareena, 2020). The origins of the pandemic may also have role to play on this, often cited as the lack of hygiene and sanity in a food market in Wuhan. There is also a view that restaurants may lose their sheen as people will be opposed to crowded places as we open up from the pandemic (Lakshmi and Shareena, 2020).

However, there also a view that as a result of the pandemic, we are going to see more technology moving into the restaurant industry through the use of online kitchen services and automation in the packaging and delivering of food among other things. Restaurants which have attempted such technology throughout the pandemic and it helped them deliver flawless, convenient, and enjoyable experience to their customers may seek to keep such technology and this could show a wave of redundancy in the restaurant industries especially of developed countries long after the pandemic. Although automation was already gaining ground prior to the pandemic, for instance, according to the National Restaurant Association's 2019 State of the Restaurant Industry report: "For some restaurant customers, technology is an added convenience. For others, it's a point of differentiation that can sway their choice of restaurants." COVID 19 might have increased this momentum brought about by technology. Also, online food delivery services have already seen a tremendous growth due to the pandemic, for instance, Young (2021) states that "Just a year ago, food delivery services were struggling financially. But as 2020 progressed (and much of the economy regressed), these companies saw much needed boosts."

There have also been previous studies which looked at the impact of natural disasters and pandemics on restaurant customer engagement (Lee and Ha, 2012; Reynolds et al., 2013). Scholars state that restaurant engagement by customers depend on customers' deposable income and in the event of a financial recession customers tend to reduce on spending (Lee and Ha, 2012; Bohlen et al., 2010) thus where consumers have been negatively affected financially by the COVID 19 pandemic this could show a decrease in customer engagement. This could be applicable to North Cyprus which is not only battling the economic downturn induced by the pandemic but also currency fluctuations which has brought economic hardship on the general population, for instance, the Turkish Lira, the main currency used in North Cyprus is said to have lost 40 per cent of its value this year. In essence, restaurants in North Cyprus will be dealing with two challenges, the downturn of the Turkish Lira as well as the impacts of COVID 19.

In fact, Ozili and Arun (2020) allude that the national lockdowns induced by COVID-19 pandemic has seen the purchase power of consumer decline hereby impacting their engagement with service providers such as restaurants. However, some scholars state that this does not apply to all restaurants and posit that during economic recessions consumers may avoid fine dining restaurants and move towards cheaper fast foods restaurants (Lee and Ha, 2014) but in relation to COVID 19 the risk posed by the two could be equally similar, for instance, Yang et al (2020) posits that the risk associated with contracting COVID 19 has decreased restaurant demand as consumers avoid eating out to minimize contact.

The advert of COVID 19 has also seen an increase in digitization with people moving away from physical engagement to online engagement and this is similarly applicable to restaurants that employed the use e-commerce in order to deal with the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Digitization allows customers to review restaurants online and speak about their experience which has the ability to positively impact a restaurant through good reviews or leave it vulnerable to negative comments. Also, digitization has made it easy for restaurants to communicate with public, sometimes through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Some restaurants have taken advantage of this engagement and sought to partner with social media platforms for more engagement with customers, for instance, the popular social media platform TikTok announced this year that it plans to open a delivery-only restaurant dubbed ‘TikTok Kitchen’. Moreover, digitization has also brought convenience of mobility which allows customers to place orders online and also check through geolocation customers are able to locate restaurants through their smartphones.

Scholars posit that customer engagement can be improved through the use of the internet and digital technologies to connect to customers (Chepurna and Criado, 2018), however, this might not necessarily be true with regard to the COVID 19 pandemic as customers, especially of fast food restaurants, who place orders online are concerned by the hygienic setting of where the food is prepared (Zeb et al, 2021). Similar sentiments are echoed by (Rendón et al, 2021) who states that customers engagement with delivery personnel after online orders was minimized due to concerns about restaurants compliance with health guidelines. There is evidence that customers have always been concerned with food safety and that they prioritized food safety over meal quality and price (Worsfold, 2006) however this has been exacerbated by the health risks posed by COVID 19.

COVID 19 has also had an impact on online services delivery, for instance, Kumar (2020) states that COVID 19 had a positive impact on online services delivery especially within the restaurant setting as the overall usage of online food delivery services increased. This also saw many people visit food ordering Apps more than ever as they were stuck at home and could not go out to restaurants. This entails that customer engagement with restaurants which already had online service delivery infrastructure was also positively impacted. Unnikrishnan and Figliozzi (2020) state that people who are more concerned about health are more likely to make online deliveries at home during COVID 19 lockdown and higher levels of technology utilization are associated with more online services deliveries. However, there is a need to critically look at this view as aforementioned studies show that people who are more concerned about their health are also concerned about the conditions under which the food has been prepared, especially during the pandemic. Despite these concerns, it seems that restaurants with online food deliveries flourished as opposed to sit-in restaurants.

This indicates that restaurants that had higher levels of technology utilization were likely to see more customer engagement on their online services during the COVID 19 lockdown. In addition to this, a policy brief by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which looked at the role of online platforms in weathering the shock of COVID 19 shows that there was an increase in the use of online platforms during the first half of 2020 in areas such as such as retail sales, restaurant delivery, and mobile payments.

COVID 19 has also had an impact on brand loyalty, scholars posit that the more restrictions placed on consumers as a result of the pandemic, the more negative feelings consumers have on a particular restaurant (Pan and Ha, 2021) and this in turn negatively impacts positive brand loyalty (Ou and Verhoef, 2017; Yu and Dean, 2001). In addition to this, there is an argument that the pandemic had a negative impact on brand loyalty as consumers replaced brand loyalty with necessity, prioritizing what was necessary for them to weather the pandemic and not the products offered by a particular brand. A study by McKinsey & Company (2021) shows that across the region of Southeastern Asian nations consumers showed that they were willing to try other brands during the pandemic. The survey also reveals that the main driver for consumers changing brands was unavailability of a product as a result of the pandemic. Pan and Ha (2021) state as a result of the pandemic brand loyalty gradually decreased at fine dining restaurants while sharply increasing at takeaway restaurants.

However, the pandemic has also upended customer loyalty strategies, for instance, Murali et el (2021) states that many brands had to adapt their strategies as a result of the pandemic and this saw the proliferation of loyalty programs, although loyalty programs were already gaining momentum prior to the pandemic, this momentum has been increased by the pandemic with many brands adopting such programs to as a loyalty strategy. Furthermore, available research reveals that brands that have shown that they have taken the consideration of the safety of the public in the conduct of their business during the pandemic have seen an increase in brand equity which has positively impacted brand loyalty (Gustafsso and Li, 2021). This is also supported by the study by Fatma and Rahman (2017) which finds that customers are more likely to get attached to a hotel that shows that it is ethical and this effectively builds brand loyalty.

2.2 Hospitality and the Restaurant Industry

There is no single definition of hospitality, some have defined hospitality as “the generosity and courtesy shown to those who are far from home or associates of the person bestowing guest-friendship” (Cvent, 2020) However, this definition seems to take away the commercial aspect of hospitality we have come to know today. Other scholars have defined hospitality as the provision of food, beverages and comfort to individuals that are not regular members of a household or an establishment, sometimes for commercial benefit (Lashley and Morrison, 2000).

Although this definition comes close to how we have come to understand modern day hospitality. The general understanding of the hospitality is the art of making people feel welcome through entertainment and comfort. Over the years the hospitality industry has grown to include things such as hotels, resorts and restaurants among many other things. There is a view that the basic function of the hospitality industry is to establish a relationship or to promote the exchange of goods and services (Lashley and Morrison, 2000). In this regard, customer engagement is imperative, for instance there are findings that companies within the hospitality industry can increase their market share through customer loyalty and engagement (Tepeci, 1999).

However, there is a lack of significant research on the phenomenon of customer engagement within the hospitality industry, with just few studies examining the impact of customer engagement within the industry (Bowden, 2009; So et al, 2014, 2016a; We et al, 2013). This is further substantiated by So and Li (2020) who state that insight into customer engagement within the hospitality and tourism industry is sparse. Furthermore, (Chathoth, 2016) posits that the literature on customer engagement in the hospitality industry is still in its infancy, also Rather and Parray (2018) argue that "empirical examination on customer engagement is relatively limited" in the hospitality industry. Despite this, there are scholars which document that "service organizations particularly those in the hospitality and tourism industry, such as hotels, airlines, and even destinations have implemented customer engagement strategies to connect with customers at various stages of consumption, including pre-consumption, during, and post-consumption" (So and Li, 2020).

This indicates that the research on customer engagement has largely analyzed personal behaviors and not organizational attributes within the hospitality industry and this gap is acknowledged by (Ou et al, 2020) whose findings seek to feel this gap through exploring individual and organization attributes of customer engagement within the hospitality and tourism industry. Moving on to customer loyalty within the hospitality industry, there is a view that customer loyalty is imperative and substantial for the survival of any business within the hospitality and tourism industry (Khalifa and Abou-Shouk, 2014; Abou-Shouk and Khalifa, 2017). In addition to this, customer loyalty also increases a firm’s market share within the hospitability and tourism industry.

There many factors that contribute to customer loyalty and ultimately the success and survivability of a business within the hospitality sector, for instance, Kandampully and Suhartanto (2000) posit that customer satisfaction is positively correlated to customer loyalty in the hospitality industry, and in the general service industry. There are studies which examine customer loyalty in other services sectors such as banking and the health sector and they reveal that customer satisfaction has an impact on future intentions of a customer to repurchase a product or service (Cronin and Taylor, 1992; McAlexander et al. 1994; Fornell 1992).

This also goes on to show that customer engagement with the aim of bringing satisfaction can also have a positive impact on customer loyalty and if restaurants sought to achieve customer satisfaction post the pandemic then this is likely to increase customer loyalty. In addition to customer satisfaction, there is also a view that a brand image within the hospitality industry has an impact on loyalty, for instance, Heung et al. (1996) and Mazanec (1995) in their study on hotel brand loyalty finds that a positive hotel brand image positively impacts customer loyalty. This view is also shared by Tepeci (1999) who states that brand image plays a positive role on brand loyalty as the image increases awareness of the brand.

It is also imperative to touch on affective commitment within the hospitality industry; affective commitment has been defined as psychological attachment which relies on feelings and affiliation in the identification of loyalty (Rather and Parray, 2018) or the emotional bond that consumers have with a particular brand. There are studies which show that affective commitment plays a pivotal role in the development of customer loyalty (Mattila, 2006). In addition to this, a study by (Liu and Mattila, 2015) shows that affective commitment to a brand within the hospitality sector increases customer engagement and ultimate brand loyalty. The study also reveals that customers that are more emotionally attached to brand are more willing to help the brand after service failure through providing feedback and this increases customer engagement.

This view is also shared by the findings by Rather and Parry (2018) which reveal that customer engagement within the hospitality sector is a determinate of affective commitment and that brands within this sector should integrate customer engagement strategies in order to win customers and enhance customer affective commitment. The aforementioned studies provide a link to the relationship between customer engagement and affective commitment within the hospitality industry.

Kiran (2019) defines customer engagement in the restaurant industry as “any positive communication – through various channels – between a customer and your restaurant.” There is a view that “In the restaurant industry, customer engagement plays a pivotal role in a restaurant's success. As engaged customers participate and become more involved in the service process, they tend to share the credit and the blame, for service outcomes, as well as develop social bonds" (Sashi et al, 2019). Also, Voicu (2021) states that customer engagement is the cornerstone of the success of a restaurant business and that restaurants that fail to offer an engaging experience are pushing their customers to other restaurants. There also a view those restaurants that engage their customers are more likely to see those customers return and thereby increase customer loyalty.

A study by George (2016) shows that restaurant customers are unlikely to bring complaints and will just switch to another restaurant after a bad experience; this also shows the importance of customer engagement in order to get feedback from customers on service. Pursuant to this, some have proffered ways in which restaurants can increase customer engagement through technology by using things such as social media platforms, e-mail marketing and SMS integration (The Restaurant Times, 2021). In addition to the above, numerous studies show that drivers of customer engagement in the restaurant industry include convenience and self-service. It has been stated that there are four pillars to customer engagement in the restaurant industry namely, personalizing the experiences of customers (Kiran, 2019), rewarding those customers that return often to the restaurant hereby encouraging loyalty, eliminating any barriers or cumbersome process in the purchase of food or services in a restaurant and lastly, making a point to enhance the experience of customers.

Numerous studies have been done which examine customer loyalty in the restaurant industry and the majority of the studies allude to the fact that customer satisfaction has a positive impact on customer loyalty in the restaurant industry, in a nutshell this entails that restaurants who seek the loyalty of customers ought to satisfy their customers. In relation to customer loyalty in the restaurant industry, a study by Haghighil (2012) reveals that "Food quality, service quality, restaurant environment, and perception of price fairness had a positive impact on customer satisfaction" and that customer satisfaction in turn has a positive impact on customer loyalty. This is also supported by the findings of study by (Bowden-Everson et al, 2013; Kuo et al, 2011; Hyun, 2010; Chen, 2016) which finds that "that satisfaction, trust, and delight ultimately generate customer loyalty in the restaurant industry."

The study by Haghighil (2012) also found that food was the most important factor that was affecting customer loyalty in the restaurant industry. This is also substantiated by Wood and Clark (1999) who state that "quality and range or type of food are key determinants in consumer loyalty." Also, another study reveals that restaurant environment which includes physical factors such as décor and artifacts, spatial layout, and ambient conditions have a direct or indirect impact on customer loyalty (Han and Ryu, 2009). In addition to this, there is a view that service quality, customer value and a good restaurant brand image contributes to customer loyalty in the restaurant industry (Aldaihani and Azman bin Ali, 2018; Martey, 2014).

However, there are studies which reveal although customer stratification had a positive impact on customer loyalty within the restaurant industry, customer delight does not necessarily lead to customer loyalty in the restaurant industry, for instance, a study by Bowden and Dagger (2011) finds that customer delight did not lead to loyalty within the restaurant industry. Customer delight has been defined as exceeding the expectations of the customer. Also, other studies reveal that the gender of customers also has a significant impact on a customer being loyal to a particular restaurant (Asad and Abid, 2018). There seems to be little literature on affective commitment in the restaurant industry with the majority of studies looking at customer engagement and customer or brand loyalty in the restaurant industry.

2.3 Social Exchange Theory

This research paper follows a an inductive approach, an inductive approach to research entails collecting data in order to explore a phenomenon to build or generate a theory through a conceptual framework (Saunders et al, 2019). This research seeks to rely on the social exchange theory to explore the relationship between customer engagement and online service delivery, brand image and brand loyalty in the restaurant business following the COVID 19 pandemic. There has not been any extensive research which uses the social exchange theory within the restaurant industry despite it being one of the leading theories that examines human engagement. The social exchange theory is a sociology and psychology theory which studies the social behaviors between an interaction between two parties in order to determine the risks and benefits. This theory is therefore suitable for examining the interaction between restaurants and customers following the COVID 19 pandemic.

The theory can be traced to the 1960s and is said to be founded “by George Homans who defined social exchange as the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costing between at least two persons” (Homans, 1961). The economic applicability of the theory was later on developed by Peter Blau who analyzed the development of the theory within an economic setting. The premise of this theory is that parties enter into a relationship under the impression that maintaining such a relationship would be beneficial to both parties involved and would result in economic or social outcomes.

The social exchange theory is a theory which views a social exchange as an interaction which may result in economic benefit and often times each party is seeking to maximize their benefit in the interaction, essentially this is applicable to the market place where the customers seeks to be rewarded for his/her expenditure. The theory posits that individuals are satisfied if they receive a fair share from their expenditure. The social exchange theory also states that reciprocity is imperative for the survivability of the interaction and that each party needs to feel that their efforts are being reciprocated (Gouldner, 1960). Studies have divided this reciprocity into fundamentally two groups, namely reciprocity as exchange interdependency and reciprocity within the context of universal justice (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). The former entails that reciprocity is kicks in motion when one act is reciprocated and in kind whereas the latter individuals are obligated to reciprocate a deed on the basis that is justice do to so and that those who do not do so will likely be punished by the universal latter on in life or are unlikely to have good things happen to them (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005).

In addition to the above, apart from reciprocity the social exchange theory alludes to the fact that rules to the interaction could include negotiated rules in which both parties to the interaction seek to get the best outcomes through a negotiated agreement. Also, the social exchange theory may also include the aspect of rationality, where the basis of engagement between the two parties is whether they see themselves benefiting for the interaction, essentially asking themselves if it is rational to engage based on the expected outcomes. Moreover, some scholars have also explained the social exchange theory using altruism where individuals seeks to benefit the other party even at the expense of themselves, however, it seems this explanation of the social exchange theory runs to the economic aspect advanced by Blau and ultimately within the business context as customer engagement is sought to benefit the business one way or the other through financial means therefore it makes no sense for business to be altruist or for the other party which is the customer, as oftentimes the basis of their engagement with a brand or business is obtain goods or a service.

There have been studies which have used the social exchange theory to examine customer loyalty in the hospitality industry as well as the perceptions of local communities towards the hospitality industry (Lee et al, 2014; Coulson et al, 2014; Wang and Pfister, 2008). The social exchange theory examines the relationship between individuals including customers and firms therefore it is effective in examining loyalty in general (Lee et al, 2014; Singh and Sirdeshmukh, 2009). Furthermore, there is a view that the logic which advanced by the social exchange theory is particularly applicable to the hospitality industry because of "the customer service nature of this industry" (Lee et al, 2014; Kanagal, 2009). With this, it is imperative to look at the applicability of social exchange theory to the relationship between customer engagement and online service delivery, affective commitment and brand loyalty in the restaurant business.

Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) posit that one of the key features of the social exchange theory is that "relationships over time evolve over time into trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments" provided that parties abide by the rules of exchange, and the positive social and economic outcomes over time builds trust and commitment in the relationship (Lambe et al, 2001; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). In addition to this, the social exchange theory is also relevant for analyzing any correlation between customer engagement and online service delivery, brand loyalty and brand image in the restaurant business. For instance, Lambe et al (2001) states that the theory also values social rewards gained in an association such as emotional satisfaction and this speaks to affective commitment within the restaurant business.

Also, there is view that the “most important benefits involved in social exchange do not have any material value on which an exact price can be put at all, as exemplified by social approval and respect” and this speaks to brand image within the restaurant business. Furthermore, creating trust is imperative for the theory as the social exchange is governed by obligations as opposed to legal terms of a contract (Blau, 1968), such obligations engender the building of trust between two parties through reciprocity and this speaks to brand loyalty within the restaurant business because the basis of loyalty is trust, essentially the ability of the customers to trust the brand and the goods and services that the brand offers.

Also, trust has been said to be imperative in the social exchange theory as it contributes to the building of commitment in the relationship. As trust builds parties to the relationships will make necessary investments in order to get desirable results and this naturally makes the parties committed to the relationship. This also speaks to customer commitment in the sense that through this theory, once a customer trusts a brand they are likely to commit to the particular brand and this is similarly applicable to the restaurant industry. There is also research that has explored the application of the social exchange theory in business to business relationships, and it shows that such relationships are built on trust, commitment and exchange norms which are similarly applicable to business and customer relationships.

2.4 Customer Engagement

There have been a plethora of definitions of customer engagement over the years however the highlighted definitions are the ones most relevant to this study. Some scholars have defined customer engagement as the extent to which a customer is psychically, emotionally and cognitively present in the relationship with a service provider (Patterson et al. 2006). This definition seems to look at the mental aspect of the customer without any examination of the brand or organization. Other academics and scholars have defined customer engagement as the intensity in the participation and connection to the offerings of a particular organization (Vivek, et al 2010; Wagner and Majchrzak, 2007). This definition of customer engagement seems to suggest that such engagement is measurable and the more intense the participation and connection the more engaged the customer is.

In addition to this, other studies have argued that customer engagement is the behavioral manifestations towards a brand beyond purchase transactions (Verhoef et al, 2010; Doorn et al, 2010; MSI, 2010). This indicates that customer engagement is non-transactional interaction between the brand and the customer. There are studies that have defined customer engagement as any interaction between the brand customers which is non-transactional (Verhoef et al, 2010), in essence, non-transactional customer behavior and in this regard customer engagement could include a firm asking customers to provide ratings of the firm.

The internet has allowed firms to take different approaches to customer engagement, for instance, it has allowed firms to create online platforms which customers can interact with each other (customer-to-customer interactions) and then extract knowledge which could be beneficial to the firm or organization from that interaction. There have been a number of studies which looked at customer engagement and its been said that the driving force behind these studies is because it has led to positive results at an individual and organizational level, for instance, organizations have managed to measure the strength of their relationships with customers through studies on customer engagement. Also, studies have also shown that firms view customer engagement as a means to build relationships with the customer at multiple levels and this is supported by the view that customer engagement is about establishing a relationship with the customer which is beyond making a purchase.

2.5 Online Service Quality

Online service delivery has been "as an activity or series of activities that takes place during the interaction between a provider and a customer through an electronic channel" (European Commission, 2006; Wilson, 1998) and other scholars have also sought to defined online service delivery in the context of electronic service or e-service and stated that "it is a service that is delivered over the Internet (or an electronic network which is reliant on the Internet or similar network for its provision) and is heavily dependent on information technology for its supply" (European Commission, 2006; Wilson, 1998). In essence, online service delivery can be defined as the offering of information and services over the internet and usually this occurs through company websites, social media and in some instances online applications.

With the proliferation of the internet, firms have managed to offer more services online and as alluded to before, the arrival of the pandemic has also exacerbated this migration from offline service delivery to online service delivery. There is a view that creating superior experience for customers through quality online service delivery can be a way in which firms remain competitive. There have been studies that have sought to explore how online service delivery has shaped customer experiences and behaviors and the impact that quality service delivery has had on consumers. In addition to this, these studies have shown that no matter the positive impacts that online service delivery is having on customers or consumers, if these impacts are not translating to business benefits then it cannot be said that online service delivery has been successful. Therefore, what this entails is that for online service delivery to be considered as successful it needs to be both beneficial to both the customer and the firm.

Furthermore, there is a view that online service delivery “enables very rich provision of information, whereas face to face this may be more limited or may occur over a range of formats” (Rose et al., 2011). Additionally, online service delivery provide convenience for customers allowing them to purchase products and services at a time and place of their choosing whereas with face to face interactions could be restricted to operating hours of the organizations and in some instances, customers will have to abide by a particular dress code. Also, there is view that it is easy for customers to appreciate the brand through online service delivery as it is presented through an audio-visual way as opposed to face to face.

2.6 Brand Image

There have been various definitions of brand image, however, for the sake of this study; only definitions which are relevant will be highlighted. Brand image has been defined as the "combined effects of brand associations" (Biel, 1992; Shank, 2008; Keller, 2008) or the perceptions that customers or consumers have of the brand (Engel et al., 1993). Some scholars have defined brand image as the thoughts that immediately come to mind when a brand is recalled (Ross et al., 2006) or the belief that a consumer has about a brand (Anselmsson et al., 2014). In essence, it can be said that brand image entails how a particular brand is viewed by consumers based on its associations. Brand image has been applied and defined in different ways by scholars to the extent that some have argued that this has caused confusion and ill-definition of the concept of brand image (Lee et al., 2014).

Due to this confusion some scholars have introduced an alternative term to define brand image such as brand identity. Brand identity has been defined as everything that makes a brand unique and sets it apart from competition (Janonis et al., 2007). However, some have argued that brand identity and brand image are closely related but are two separate concepts. It seems the point of departure between the two is the origins, for instance, there is a view that brand identity originates from the corporate or company perspective where the company makes unique products or services to meet a particular identity and brand image originates from the consumer and despite how a company identifies itself the perception of the company by the consumer is referred to as brand image (Nandan, 2004).

Although there is some sense to this distinction, the very definitions of brand identity and image are so similar that it is difficult to tell them apart and there is merit to the argument that this an alternative term picked up scholars due to the confusion caused by the definition of brand image. For instance, some scholars have defined brand identity as a set of brand associations (Aaker, 2003) and Janoni et al (2007) states that brand identity is defined by Grundey (2002) as "the most important stage of the identification of a good from the quality on which the further existence of the good depends. The main principled provision of brand identity is a way, which becomes a possibility to reach the consumer." Such conceptualization of brand identity indicates that there is not much difference between brand image and brand identity.

2.7 Brand Loyalty

Research on brand loyalty has looked at the concept from two perspectives namely behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty and behavioral loyalty is defined as "frequency of repeat purchase" or repeated purchase intentions or behaviors whereas attitudinal "loyalty is defined as the psychological commitment that a consumer makes in the purchase act, such as intentions to purchase and intentions to recommend without necessarily taking the actual repeat purchase behavior into account." (Nam et al, 2011). Some scholars have stated that attitudinal loyalty can be viewed in the form of indicators such as trust, attachment and commitment to a brand (Rather and Sharma, 2016) and this allows us to separate attitudinal loyalty from repeated buying. However there is a view that although this distinction allows the researchers to differentiate between the two, attitudinal loyalty is declarative in nature making it difficult to ascertain whether what is declared is the actual reality (Rather and Sharma, 2016).

Some scholars have argued that brand loyalty is three dimensional namely behavioral, attitudinal and composite. In this regard composite loyalty can be defined as a mixture between behavioral loyalty and attitudinal loyalty. Most scholars have either sought the behavioral approach or the attitudinal approach for instance, scholars have "defined brand loyalty as keeping preferable to a specific product or service" (Mao, 2010) and this can be argued to be a behavioral approach. However, scholars such as Tepeci (1999) have taken the composite approach, defining brand loyalty as "Brand loyalty has been described as a behavioral response and as a function of psychological processes. That means, brand loyalty is a function of both behavior and attitudes."

It should be noted that the majority of scholars that have looked at brand loyalty have defined it repeated purchase or at least the intention to do so. Despite this view, it seemed some scholars have rejected the behavioral arguing that repeated purchase is not evidence of brand loyalty (Tepeci, 1999). Literature on brand loyalty has also looked at the impact of such loyalty on business, for instance, some of the impacts that have been cited by scholars include the reduction in marketing costs that it brings, the increase in profit and the provision of a competitive advantage to the firm because of a loyal customer base.

2.8 Mobile Application Usability

The International Standards Organization has defined mobile application usability as "the extent to which a mobile application can be used by specified users to achieve specified goals with effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction in a specified context of use" (Hoehle and Venkatesh, 2015). Some scholars have argued that simplicity and interactivity are the key determinants of mobile application usability (Lee et al., 2015).

The proliferation of technology has had a positive impact on society, allowing individuals to have access to goods and services that were not available without the use of technology and the internet. This is also seen the introduction of different mobile applications to serve different functions, and this means mobile applications have to be designed differently to serves a variety of functions such as interfacing with others on social media, using financing services such as banking or ordering food online. Mobile application design can be defined as the process of building a mobile application and it has also been defined as "the degree to which a user perceives that a mobile application is generally designed well" (Hoehle and Venkatesh, 2015).

The literature on application design reveals that there various factors that influence mobile application design such as the ability of the application to retain data of the user and where users are repeatedly required to input data they become dissatisfied and frustrated with the mobile application (Hoehle and Venkatesh, 2015). In addition to this, another factor that influences mobile application design is whether the application is readily accessible and if users have to wait a long time for the mobile application to open, this also causes user frustration. Furthermore, there is a view that a mobile application should be able to present information regardless of whether the mobile application is handle-held horizontally or vertically (Hoehle and Venkatesh, 2015). A study by Ickin et al (2012) reveal that "users did not like the position and location of the keys on the smartphone screen, they had difficulty with resizing or webpage scrolling, they did not agree with built-in dictionary items, and they complained about inefficient manual input.” This entails that an interface design is imperative to users and is an essential aspect of mobile application design.

Mobile application functionality on the other hand can be defined as the ability of the users to interact with the application in a variety of ways. Some have defined mobile application functionality as “the actions or operations, capabilities and usefulness of a mobile application software and the capacity of the mobile application to provide a useful function.” The is little literature on mobile application functionality, however, it should be noted that similar to mobile application design, functionality entails to usability of particular mobile application and the easier it is to use the more satisfied the mobile user will be.

2.9 Perceived Employee Boundary Span Behavior

Employee boundary span behavior can be defined as the interaction between employees and external stakeholders whose values and objectives may diverge with that of the company or organization (Korschun, 2015). It has been stated that based on the relationships that boundary spanning employees build, they could potentially have a significant impact on the organization or company. Boundary spanning has been defined as “the efforts by an organization to establish connections both within and outside the organization” (Hult Blogs, 2013) such as consumers or suppliers. Another definition offered for boundary spanning is “the bridge between an organization and its exchange partners” (Scott, 1992). Boundary spanning can also be used to bridge relationships within the organization between employees in different levels of the organization.

Boundary spanning employees have been defined as "individuals who have a dedicated job role or responsibility to work in a multi-agency and multi-sectoral environment and to engage in boundary spanning activities, processes and practices"(Williams, 2011), and their behaviors as "as processing information from various environments and providing representation to stakeholders outside the organization" (Aldrich and Herker, 1977). There is a dearth in literature on employee boundary spannning behavior owing to the fact that this is a concept that came into prominence only a decade ago. However, despite this some scholars have examined the employee boundary spanning behavior arguing that such behavior in relation to external stakeholders such as distributors, suppliers and consumer can be broken down into three namely collaborative behavior where employees of a brand create a collaborative relationship with external stakeholders, secondly there is halfhearted service where the employee builds a lukewarm relationship with external stakeholders and proving halfhearted services and information and finally there is adversarial behavior where an employee becomes so invested in the organization that they are adversarial to external stakeholders.

2.10 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework seeks to show the relationship between the key variables in this research and the model suggests that brand image and online service quality have an impact on brand loyalty with customer engagement as the mediating variable. In this case, brand image and online service quality are the independent variables; Sekaran and Bougie (2016) define an independent variable as the variable which influences the dependent variable in either a positive or negative way. Brand image can be defined as the consumer's perception of brand and online service quality can be defined as "the consumers' overall evaluation and judgment of the excellence and quality of e-service offerings in the virtual marketplace" (Santos, 2003). These definitions have been chosen for this study because they are the most relevant to our research problem.

Customer engagement has been defined as any interaction between the brand and the customer or consumer which is non-transactional. This definition of customer engagement is the most relevant to the research at hand as this research is seeking to find out how this interaction has been impacted by the pandemic. Customer engagement is the mediating variable and this has been defined as "one that surfaces between the time the independent variables start operating to influence the dependent variable and the time their impact is felt on it" (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016).

Brand loyalty is the dependent variable in this research and it has been defined as anything can take on varying levels or values and is the main interest of this researcher. Brand loyalty has been defined as the repeated purchase of a products or services from a particular brand. Similar to customer engagement, this definition of brand loyalty has been chosen because it is the most relevant to the research. I have chosen brand loyalty as the dependent variable because the aim of this research is to examine the relationship between brand image, online service quality, customer engagement and brand loyalty in the restaurant industry post the COVID 19 pandemic, in essence of what this analysis is seeking to establish, whether customer loyalty in restaurants in has been impacted by the pandemic, therefore it is only logic to nominate brand loyalty as the dependent variable.

The reason why brand image and online service quality have been nominated as independent and variables respectively is because they follow the logic of the four conditions posited by Sekaran and Bougie (2016). The conditions state that the independent variable must precede the dependent variable, in essence the cause must occur before the effect, this regard there has to be customer engagement first before there is brand loyalty, and therefore it is only logical that they were nominated as the independent variables.

The theoretical framework of the study posits that customer engagement has an impact on brand loyalty and influences it in either a positive or negative way and has a strong contingent effect on brand loyalty as a mediating variable. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) state that a meditating variable "is one that surfaces between the time the independent variables start operating to influence the dependent variable and the time their impact is felt on it." The a relationship between brand image, online service quality, customer engagement and brand loyalty exist because as seen in the literature review, for the development of brand loyalty there first has to be interaction between the customer and the brand (customer engagement) and such interaction could happen virtually (online service quality) and that interaction needs to create a perception of the brand in the consumer's mind (brand image), and this in turn leads to repeated purchase of goods and services from the brand (brand loyalty).

2.11 Hypothesis Development

2.11.1 Perceived Employee Boundary Span Behavior, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty

As alluded earlier in the thesis, employee boundary span behavior entails the engagement between employees and external stakeholders such as suppliers, distributors or customers whose values and objectives may be divergent with that of the organization. It has been argued that where an employee strongly identifies with an organization, this could potentially have negative consequences on how the employee engages with external stakeholders such as suppliers, distributors and customers (Korschun, 2015). This could lead to an adversial relationship between the external stakeholders.

However, this could also have a positive impact on this relation; for instance, Yoo (2013) applies the social exchange theory to employee boundary spanning behavior arguing that where the relationship between the employee and the organization are beneficial the employee seeks to have positive retains for organization. This reciprocity can happen through the employee forming cooperative relationships with stakeholders that could in turn positively impact the organization brand loyalty and image.

Some scholars argue that in relation to external stakeholder engagement which also includes customer engagement some employees form three distinct types of relationship such as cooperative relationships (Grizzle at el, 2009) whereas some provide lukewarm service (Thomson and Heccker, 2002) and others become hostile to customers (Skarlick et al, 2008). As alluded earlier scholars such as Yoo (2013) have also used the social exchange theory to analyze the aforementioned employee boundary spanning behaviors.

Cooperative relationships between the employees and stakeholders includes forming a bond and trust between the stakeholder and the employee. It can be argued that the social exchange theory is also instrumental at analyzing these close cooperative relationships. As stated before in the thesis, the social exchange theory posits that parties to an exchange engage in order to obtain a beneficial result for themselves and are likely to keep engaging where they see a beneficial outcome. It can be argued that in the cooperative relationships, both the employee and the stakeholder remain engaged if the cooperative relationship is providing beneficial results for both parties.

There is also a view that a deliberate attempt by an organization to form a brand image by the organization can lead the employee viewing themselves as one with the organization and this will ultimately lead employees to engaging with external stakeholders in order to derive the most benefit for the organization. Additionally, this can also motivate employees to engage with stakeholders as they seek to contribute to the collective success of the organization (Korschun, 2015). Such employee behavior has an impact on brand loyalty in the sense that where an employee forms cooperative relationship with a customer through engagement this is likely to result in loyalty from the customer.

Perceived employee span behavior looks at how the employee engages with external stakeholder and as aforementioned there is cooperative relationship and in addition to this, there are also adversarial relationships. Adversarial relationships entails that the employee is in direct competition with the external stakeholder and Korschun (2015) states that "Prior research shows a wide range of ways an employee may interact with external stakeholders. These relationships may be adversarial, where the employee actively competes with the stakeholder, usually in a zero-sum game." Applying the social exchange theory, this entails that often times the employee will not see any beneficial outcome in engaging external stakeholders and the relationship is marred with mistrust and competition. For instance, this may entail that employees may withhold certain information from customers on products and services offered by the organization if employees can monopolize that information to their benefit such a making a sale. There is also a view that employee boundary spanning behavior separates employees that view themselves as one with the organization and even superior to external stakeholders with the employees that work within the confines of the organization.

There is a view among scholars that the relationship between employees and external stakeholders does not necessary always border between either cooperative or adversarial relationships but can be a combination of both which result in the lukewarm provision of services. The social exchange theory is equally applicable to such relationship on case by case basis. For instance, where the employee may take a cooperative approach where they feel that the outcome of the engagement could beneficial and also take an adversarial approach where the employee sees no benefit in the engagement leading at the end of the day to lukewarm engagement.

It should be acknowledged that such engagements with external stakeholders has an impact on brand image through customer engagement. The building of cooperative relationship with external stakeholders by employees can result in a positive impact on brand loyalty as well as brand image. Similarly, adversarial relationships with external stakeholders can also lead to negative impact on brand image as well as having detrimental impact on brand loyalty. However, in light of limited literature on the subject it difficult the impact that a lukewarm external stakeholder engagement will have on both brand image and loyalty.

Furthermore, in addition to the aforementioned argument which posits that perceived employee boundary span has impact on brand loyalty, the relation to brand image is a bit different in the sense that how the consumer perceives a brand or an organization determines how they engage with the brand and its employees therefore behaviors which led to an employee creating cooperative relationships with the customer, lukewarm attitude towards the customer or adversarial attitude towards the customer can only be informed after the customer has initiated the engagement with the organization based on the perceived brand image. In other words, it is the customer’s perception of the brand or organization that has an effect on employee boundary span behavior.

The positive impact that employee boundary spanning behavior can have on brand image is also explored by Yoo et al (2014) who posit that Client service personnel, as a special sort of boundary employee (reconciling the firm and the customer), contribute to product and service excellence in a variety of ways. Efficient service staff, for instance, execute on the business's commitments and generate a good image for the organization. With these arguments looking at perceived employee boundary spanning behavior this it can be argued that:

H1a: Perceived employee boundary span behavior effects brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement.

H1b: Perceived employee boundary span behavior has an impact on brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement.

2.11.2 Online Service Quality, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty

There is a view that customer experiences and customer perception of brand are influenced by the quality of online service delivery and that the quality of service delivery has in impact on how customers engages with the goods and services in the long term (Sekundi, 2021). In essence, high quality online service delivery is likely to be profitable for the business in the long run and high quality of online service delivery has a positive impact on brand image. Although online service delivery makes it harder to retain customers, it makes overall customer engagement easier including attracting new customers (Holland and Baker, 2001) and this is supported by scholars who posit that customers can make use of online platforms to engage a brand and reduce uncertainty (Hsieh, 2005).

In addition to this, there is a view that there are key elements that shape customers perception of high quality online service delivery such as ease of use and reliability, early response, and speed of service (Shamdasan, 2008). According to the social exchange theory, individuals will seek to maintain a relationship if they are benefiting from the engagement or seek to benefit from the engagement in future, and through online service delivery such engagement is initiated by the customer by logging in, making an enquiry or interacting with the service provider and if a customer gets positive feedback from this interaction they are likely to engage with the brand further including increasing “their willingness to recommend the company or repurchase intentions” (Grzegorczyk and Mazurek, 2011).

Furthermore, the more the customer engages with online services offered by an organization the more their likely to be satisfied by the delivery of those services and form a positive perception of the brand. This argument is substantiated by (Grzegorczyk and Mazurek, 2011) who posit that in the online banking sector the “customer role in online banking can expand significantly as they engage with the service, and this influences how they perceive the service experience.”

There is a view that effective online service delivery has the ability to foster customer engagement and positively impact brand image. This view is also supported by Rust and Kannan (2003) who argue that repeated interactions with customers online has the potential to yield commitment and a positive brand image. Keating et al (2010) state that within the online context “effective service delivery was found to enhance the quality of customer-firm relationships, and consequently, the customer's perceived loyalty” and that firms should maintain high service standards to continue enjoying loyalty from their customers.

It can be argued that the quality of online service delivery has an impact on brand image (Herington and Weaven, 2007) and customer commitment (Donney and Cannon, 1997), this is supported by a view that services quality promotes customer loyalty and retention (Yoo and Donthu, 2001; Han & Hyun, 2017; So et al., 2013). Furthermore, the quality of online service delivery can have a positive impact on customer commitment, for instance, Donney and Cannon (1997) posit that “repeated interactions between customers and service suppliers help customers assess the service firms’ credibility and benevolence” and online service delivery allows the creation of emotional attachment over a large demographic through ongoing personalized communications.

This study has already alluded to the positive impacts of online service delivery as opposed to offline such as convenience, early response, and perception of the brand by customers. These factors also play a role in the development of a positive brand image, for instance, the ability of a customer to order goods and services in the comfort could be better than visiting the organization in person, and it is this convenience that could led to an individual forming a positive perception of the brand. In addition, this study has shown that online service delivery creates a better brand perception to customer due to the audio-visual nature of the online environment and this perception that has a positive impact of the development of brand loyalty. Furthermore, where a customer get positive results from a brand through online service delivery they are likely to be committed to that brand.

From aforementioned studies alluded to in this study, it can be argued that there is a relationship between online service quality and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. Customer engagement can take place in a physical or online setting and at the core of the aforementioned definitions of customer engagement are the customer's interactions with the brand and how such interactions can potentially lead to repeated purchases. In this regard, there is a view that customer engagement has an impact on brand loyalty, for instance, customer engagement from an organizational perspective has been defined as activities facilitating "repeated interactions that strengthen the emotional, psychological or physical investment a customer has in a brand" (Sedley, 2010). However, some scholars have disputed this arguing that it is not necessarily customer engagement that leads to brand loyalty but customer satisfaction (Bowden, 2014). Such customer satisfaction can brought about through quality of services offered online by a brand.

However, despite this view, Vivek et al (2010) proposes that there is a correlation between customer engagement and brand loyalty, stating customer engagement "will be positively associated with an individual's loyalty to the brand, organization, or offering he or she associates with his or her focus of engagement" and that it is concerned with examining the customer-brand relationships especially within an online setting which can lead to the formation of brand loyalty. This view is supported by Greve (2014) who argues that customer engagement leads to the formation of loyalty and Li et al (2020) who state that customer engagement is a determinant of brand loyalty.

Furthermore, Bowden (2009) argues that customer engagement is distinct from, but related to loyalty. From this it can be argued that where online customer engagement results in a satisfied customer through the quality of service this can lead to brand loyalty. Additionally, there is an argument that "The process of customer engagement, proposes that individuals move through a sequential psychological process to become loyal to a service brand" (Bowden, 2009). It is clear that customer engagement is the precondition to the development of brand loyalty and the relationship between the two is evident and also be further strengthened by quality online service. In light of the above argument, this research proposes that:

H2a: Online service quality has an impact on brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement

H2b: Online service quality affects brand loyalty with mediating role of customer engagement.

2.11.3 Mobile Application Design, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty

The use of mobile application in order to access tourism-related goods and services is essential and the research on the relationship between brand and mobile application elucidates this imperative. Some scholars have offered best practices in the developing mobile applications so that they can appeal to people. Wroblewski (2011) argue that the essence is to develop a mobile application that is alive to the constraints of a mobile device and align this with the reasons why people pull out their smartphones. For instance, he cites some of the mobile device constraints which need to be taken into account when designing a mobile applications such as physical constraints where the screen of a phone is smaller than that of desktop computer and therefore the mobile applications needs to be designed in such a way that the use of thumbs and fingers is practical.

Where a mobile application is properly designed to the satisfaction of users it has the ability of creating a good image for the brand. As alluded before, a good mobile application design has the ability of creating customer engagement through offering detailed information on the goods and services offered by a brand as well as being accessible 24/7 whenever the user needs it. Also, a good mobile application design has the ability to deliver goods and services faster to the user hereby creating a good image for the brand. In essence it can be argued that an effective mobile application design has the potential of positively impact the image of the brand.

Previous research reveals that there is correlation between brand image and customer satisfaction (Neupane, 2015; Nazir et al., 2016 and Dayanti et al., 2019), and therefore it can be argued that a properly designed mobile application which engenders customer satisfaction has the ability to positively impact brand image. There is a study which reveals a correlation between customer satisfaction, purchasing intentions and branded mobile application. According to (Orman and Sebetci, 2021), the study "examined the impact of benefits from interaction with branded mobile apps on consumer satisfaction and purchasing intentions by taking the uses and satisfies approach…According to the study findings…the relationship between consumer satisfaction and purchasing intentions has also been confirmed." With this it can also be advanced that an effectively designed mobile application has the ability to induce repeated purchasing intention hereby giving rise to brand loyalty.

Studies have shown that once individuals install a mobile application they barely use it, and that only a small number of people continue to use the application in the long run (Mattke and Maier, 2021), for instance, 77 per cent of users uninstall a mobile application in the first three days of downloading it and 90 per cent of users uninstall an application after just one month (Bonnie, 2017). However, mobile application providers need to maintain a large user base through customer engagement so that they can retain profit from adverting content on the mobile application. Mattke and Maier (2021) state that “many providers focus on increasing and strengthening their brand loyalty to reduce customer churn rates.” In other words mobile application providers need to maintain brand loyalty in order to remain profitable and this can be achieved through customer engagement.

With this it is imperative to look at the impact of mobile application design on brand loyalty. A study which examined the relationship between mobile applications design in the hotel industry and brand loyalty revealed that mobile hotel application positively impact brand loyalty (Kim and Alder, 2011). As alluded earlier, mobile application users are likely to be satisfied with an application that has the ability to retain their data so that they don’t have input the data again, a mobile application which is easily accessible once it has been turned and an application which is designed in such a way that it succinctly presents information regardless of whether is handheld horizontally or vertically. Also, a mobile application which has interactive interface is likely to satisfy application users, therefore It can be argued that a mobile application design which contains these elements which engender customer engagement is likely to induce brand loyalty.

In addition to the above, there is also a view that customer engagement through gamification of mobile applications has the ability of inducing brand loyalty (Hsu and Chen, 2018; Wolf et al, 2020). Gamification has been defined as “using features that video games use (e.g., avatars, level progression systems, or awards) in non-game contexts to improve the user experience” (Mattke and Maier, 2021). This further supported by scholars who state that “entertainment applications increase brand responses by causing higher entertainment levels” (Orman and Sebetci, 2021). Furthermore, it can be developed that by seeking to increase customer engagement through gamification and bringing entertainment to applications, this has a potential to develop brand loyalty. With these arguments it can be stated that:

H3a: There is correlation between mobile application design and brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement.

H3b: Mobile application design impacts brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement.

2.11.4 Mobile Application Functionality, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty

There is a growing understanding that mobile applications have an impact on brand image, and a study which looks at the use of mobile application for branding purposes in Sweden substantiates this. The study looked at four mobile applications from “King of the slope by Vattenfall, Körklar? by SalusAnsvar, McWrap Go&Get by McDonalds and Många Sträckor Små by Lantmännen” (Vikström and Zheng, 2013). The findings of the study showed that mobile applications have an impact on company brand and a positive impact on brand image can be achieved through long and short term applications.

The study also reveals that "The McDonalds app, which includes the McWrap Go&Get app within their main app, is the great representation of long-term thinking in leveraging the mobile app as a platform for engagement with its consumers that we have seen to yet." (Vikström and Zheng, 2013). The study also reveals that a mobile application provides a platform for brands to build long-term relationship between consumers and the brand, in turn, converting consumers into regular customers. It can be argued that the transition is only feasible where the mobile application functions to the satisfaction of the consumer. In essence, it can be stated that mobile application functionality has an impact on brand loyalty.

The arguments made above are similarly applicable in relation to brand image; however the only difference that it can be argued that brand image has an impact on mobile application functionality and ultimately customer engagement. This is supported by a study which argues that brand image is the entry point to a mobile application and therefore affects how the user perceives the functionality of the mobile application and ultimately economic returns of the enterprise. For instance, Shangguan and Yaun (2018) posit that "taking brand image as entry point, taking mobile application as carrier, from the perspective of visual design…To a certain extent, it can affect consumers' purchasing psychology and purchase behavior, and create more substantial economic benefits for the enterprises." In other words the argument is that brand image has an impact on how consumers perceive the functionality of a mobile application and the subsequent engagement including transactional activities.

As aforementioned, the key determents of mobile application usability are simplicity and interactivity, and it is these key elements that have the ability to attract customer engagement on a mobile application. There studies which have argued that mobile application "usability is a distal determinant of brand loyalty" (Lee et al., 2015).

Additionally, there scholars who have argued that usability is the main driver of brand loyalty (Jackson, 2006) and this is further substantiated with the view that functionality which includes the capacity of the mobile application to provide a useful function and the ease of use as the antecedent of mobile service loyalty (Cyr et al., 2006). With such literature is can be argued that the ease of use of an application as well as the ability of the application to meet its function expectations by the user has the ability to build brand loyalty. Therefore:

H4a: Mobile application functionality perception is impacted by brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement.

H4b: Mobile application functionality can lead to brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement.

Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Data Collection, Sample and Procedure

The data for this thesis was collected from mainly individuals using mobile applications to order food online and employed the quantitative research methodology for the investigation of the relationships between perceived employee boundary spanning behavior, online service quality, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement in the restaurant business following the COVID 19 pandemic.

Quantitative research design is defined as research which examines the connection between variables that are usually measured numerically and analyzed through the use of statistical and graphical techniques (Saunder et al., 2019). Quantitative research design is commonly used in business research as conclusion based on numerical data is essential; it also provides an overview needed to make sound business decisions. Consequently, quantitative research is imperative for the growth of a business as numerical data has proven to be effective in making sound business decisions (QuestionPro, 2021). A quantitative research design can use one data collection technique such as a questionnaire and this known as mono method quantitative study (Saunder et al., 2019).

Purposive and convenience sampling was used by the researcher. Purposive sampling is also known as judgment sampling and is a technique where a researcher uses their own judgment to choose who participants in the study. Convenience technique is used to collect data from a convenient pool of participants. This research is a mono method quantitative study which used survey questions as the main data collection technique. A survey is a method of collecting data from a particular population to understand their knowledge, behavior and attitudes (Fink, 2003). Surveys are popular in the business context as they can be taken for variety of things such as consumer decision making, customer and job satisfaction among others things, which would give the business credible data to make decisions. This study's survey includes a self-completed electronic distributed questionnaire on mobile application usage by customers in restaurants which aims to better understand customers' experiences using mobile applications to order food in a restaurant. A questionnaire is set questions which respondents have to answer within a set of alternatives (Sekaran and Bougie, 2016). The survey questionnaire in this study is divided into eight sections containing 43 questions with responses ranging between "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree."

3.1.1 Common Method Bias: Procedural Remedies

To limit the possibility of common method bias, the researcher will take a few practical procedures and cautious measures as indicated by Podsakoff (Podsakoff et al., 2012). First, the front page of each questionnaire contain a phrase that will assure the participants that the survey was unnamed, anonymous, and that the data obtained would be kept secret. Second, completed surveys will be gathered in envelopes that are closed and sealed. Finally, one the front page of each questionnaire it is noted that "there are no right or incorrect responses to the questionnaire's items."

3.1.2 Measures

For the validation of hypothesized relation in the research model, multiple items measurement scales was developed for all variables in the research construct. All measurement items was adopted from extant research. Due to the fact that these measurement items are likely to give different result when used in different context or setting, a pilot study which included 20 mobile application users was conducted. The pilot study is to ensure the measures are a good fit for the study settings and the questions were well understood by the correspondent.

3.1.3 Perceived Employee Boundary Span Behavior

To measure perceived employee boundary span behavior 8-items was adopted from Bettencourt, et al., (2005). The adapted items will be measured using a 5-pont Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree).measuring perceived employee boundary span behavior. Sample item includes “The contact employee share creative solutions to problems.”

3.1.4 Brand Image

Brand Image was gauged via a 3-items used by Bruhn et al., (2012). Also the measurement scale was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Sample item include: "This restaurant's brand possesses complete practical functions (services and adequate facilities)."

3.1.5 Brand Loyalty

Zeithaml et al. (1996) employed a 4-item scale to assess brand loyalty, and the measuring method was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) which we adopted. Sample item include: "I would do more business with this restaurant in the next few years."

3.1.6 Customer Engagement

Customer engagement will be gauged via 11-items used by Harrigan, et al., (2017). Also the measurement scale was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Sample item include: "I feel excited about this restaurant."

3.1.7 Mobile Application Usability

Mobile application design will be measured using a 4-item scale adopted from Tarute, et al., (2017) and the scale deployed was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Sample of question includes: "I can easily find the food I desire on the mobile application I am currently using because the content of the mobile application has a convenience interface."

3.1.8 Mobile Application Functionality

Mobile application design will be measured using a 3-item scale adopted from Tarute, et al., (2017) and the scale used was a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Sample of question includes: "It is possible to order food quickly from restaurant using mobile applications."

3.1.9 Online Service Quality

Green creativity will be measured using a 5-item scale adopted from Kim, et al., (2021) and the scale that was used to measure the respondents perception was a 7-point Likert scale (1 = I strongly disagree; 7 = I strongly agree). Sample of question includes: "This restaurant serves food exactly as I ordered it."

3.2 Data Analysis

A quantitative analysis was used to analyze the data. The measurement model for this study was conducted using Fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (FsQCA). This is a method which combines variable orientated and case scenario quantitative analysis used to assess the motivations and emotions of individuals using social networking sites or applications (Krishen et al., 2016). Additionally, FsQCA asses the emotions in e-commerce and online service delivery (Fang et al., 2016; Pappas et al., 2016).

Chapter 4

RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Measurement Model

Data was collected from different nationalities: Angola- 0.3%, Botswana- 1.9%, British- 1.5%, Cameroonian- 0.6%, Congo- 0.3%, Cypriot- 3.7%, Ghana- 3.1%, Kenya- 1.2%, KSA- 1.9%, Lesotho- 0.3%, Malawi- 1.2%, Mali- 0.3%, Mozambique- 0.6%, Namibia- 3.3%, Nigerian- 6.5%, South African- 10.2%, Swaziland-9.6%, Tanzanian- 2.5%, Uganda- 2.9%, Zambia- 8.4%, Zimbabwe- 39.1%. Full demographics of respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographics of respondents

Variable	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Age		
18-27	111	34.5
28-37	110	34.2
38-47	58	18.0
48-57	43	13.4
Gender		
Male	161	50
Female	161	50
Education		
Vocational	71	22
High school	41	12.7
Bachelors	162	50.3
Post Grad	48	14.9
Marital Status		
Single	207	64.3
Married	115	35.7

To assess the data's construct validity (convergent and discriminant), a measurement model analysis was done. First, the standard loading of each construct's items are presented in Table 2 (items were dropped from the PEBSB and CE constructs due to low loading). Then for convergent validity, the composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) both had acceptable values (see Table 3). In addition, the Cronbach alpha values of the seven constructs demonstrate strong reliability at >0.7 except for the Brand Image construct with 0.697. Nonetheless, Wim et al. (2008) argued that Cronbach alpha values between 0.6–0.8 are acceptable, thus there seem to be no reliability issues with the study's data. Collectively, these results suggest the soundness of the study's scale structures.

Table 2: Standard loadings

Items	Standard loadings	Mean (SD)
PEBSB		3.215 (0.637)
PEBSB1	-	
PEBSB2	0.642	
PEBSB3	0.673	
PEBSB4	0.792	
PEBSB5	0.656	
PEBSB6	0.788	
PEBSB7	-	
PEBSB8	0.764	
Online SERVQUAL		4.384 (0.616)
OSQ1	0.443	
OSQ2	0.946	
OSQ3	0.915	

OSQ4	0.93	
OSQ5	0.957	
Mobile App Design		4.567 (1.857)
MAD1	0.918	
MAD2	0.93	
MAD3	0.918	
MAD4	0.938	
Mobile App Function		4.867 (1.518)
MAF1	0.898	
MAF2	0.779	
MAF3	0.86	
Customer Engagement		3.056 (0.630)
CE1	0.982	
CE2	0.973	
CE3	0.93	
CE4	-	
CE5	0.973	
CE6	-	
CE7	0.994	
CE8	0.958	
CE9	0.943	
CE10	-	
CE11	-	
Brand Image		3.255 (0.880)
BI1	0.831	
BI2	0.707	
BI3	0.674	
Brand Loyalty		4.552 (1.394)
BL1	0.755	
BL2	0.747	
BL3	0.792	
BL4	0.83	

Table 3: Convergent and Discriminant validities

Variable	α	CR	AVE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Mobile App Design	0.945	0.96	0.858	**0.926**						
Mobile App Function	0.801	0.883	0.717	0.208	**0.847**					
Brand Image	0.697	0.783	0.549	0.127	0.21	**0.741**				
Brand Loyalty	0.789	0.862	0.611	0.242	0.319	0.198	**0.782**			
PEBSB	0.817	0.866	0.521	0.086	0.132	0.158	0.205	**0.722**		
Customer Engagement	0.988	0.99	0.931	0.191	0.241	0.17	0.143	0.164	**0.965**	
Online SERVQUAL	0.895	0.932	0.742	0.092	0.064	0.138	0.104	0.126	0.167	**0.861**

α- Cronbach Alpha value; Square root of AVEs in bold in the diagonal

4.2 Structural Model

Following the establishment of the constructs' reliability and validity, through the assessment of the measurement model, the study's structural model is then assessed and the results of the hypothesized relationships are presented in Table 4. First, the inner VIF is evaluated and found to be <3. The path from PEBSB, online SERVQUAL, Mobile App Design and Mobile App Function to Customer Engagement is 1.035, 1.024, 1.055 and 1.061 respectively; likewise, the path from Customer Engagement to Brand Image and Brand Loyalty are both 1.000. Hence, this model has no multicollinearity issue (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). The significance of the study's hypothesized relationships is evaluated, using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resampling runs. The R2 value of predictors on Customer Engagement, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty is 0.113, 0.031 and 0.023 respectively.

Subsequently, to cross-check the importance of each path, the effect size (f2) was evaluated (Sullivan & Feinn, 2012). Following Cohen (1988), the effect sizes are categorized into four levels: trivial (<0.02), small (≥0.02), medium (≥0.15), and large (≥0.35). The effect size of PEBSB and online SERVQUAL on customer engagement are 0.015 and 0.020. That of mobile app design on customer engagement is 0.020, and mobile app functional on customer engagement is 0.036. Finally, the effect size of customer engagement on brand image and brand loyalty is 0.032 and 0.023 respectively.

To evaluate the predictive power of the study's model, based on Shmueli et al. (2019) PLS predict procedure was undertaken. As presented in Table 4, the Q2 predict values are greater than zero. Also, the results show that the RMSE values for Customer Engagement, Brand Image and Brand Loyalty are lower for PLS-SEM than for the linear model. Together, these results show that the study's PLS path model possesses a high predictive power (Hair et al., 2020).

Table 4: Predictive power Assessment

Items	**Q^2 Predict**	**RMSE**	
		PLS SEM	**Linear Model**
BI1	0.013	1.166	1.199
BI2	0.022	1.20	1.263
BI3	0.016	1.193	1.209
BL1	0.021	1.91	1.922
BL2	0.019	1.774	1.798
BL3	0.024	1.705	1.709
BL4	0.023	1.82	1.881
CE1	0.065	1.253	1.281
CE2	0.065	1.156	1.205
CE3	0.075	1.224	1.257
CE5	0.086	1.28	1.318
CE7	0.072	1.203	1.247
CE8	0.014	1.316	1.364
CE9	0.069	1.209	1.234

BI: Brand Image, BL: Brand Loyalty, CE: Customer Engagement

4.3 Fuzzy-Set Analysis

Next, the latent variable scores of all constructs from PLS-SEM are used to perform a fsQCA. First, the latent variable scores were calibrated into fuzzy sets, with values ranging from 0–1 (Ragin, 2008). Then, a fuzzy-set truth table including all possible configurations (recipes) of antecedents to predict high levels of brand image and brand loyalty with acceptable coverage (>0.2) and consistency (>0.8) was created. The intermediate solution, which takes account of part of complex solutions and the parsimonious solution, is reported because it makes it possible to detect both peripheral and core conditions in the solutions (Fiss, 2011). After a truth table, a necessary condition analysis was conducted and it does not include a consistency and coverage value greater than 0.9 for any of the configurations (Table 8). Thus no single condition or variable is necessary to generate high levels of brand image and brand loyalty.

Finally, to assess the fsQCA solution's predictive power, the study's data was randomly split into two subsamples. The first subsample is used to identify sufficient configurations with coverage >0.2 and consistency >0.8. Based on the first subsample, Table 9 reports the sufficient configurations which generate high levels of brand loyalty and brand image. Subsequently, based on the second subsample, an XY plot is drawn to calculate the coverage and consistency for the configurations extracted from the first subsample. Figure 2 represents the outcomes, and the second subsample's results show acceptable levels of coverage and consistency for the sufficient configurations predicting brand loyalty and brand image from the first subsample, corroborating the model's predictive power as earlier confirmed in the PLS-SEM analysis.

Table 5: Necessary conditions for Brand image and Brand loyalty				
Conditions	Brand Image		Brand Loyalty	
	Consistency	Coverage	Consistency	Coverage
Online SERVQUAL	0.720026	0.723688	0.713253	0.729364
Customer Engagement	0.734027	0.711753	0.725858	0.716088
PEBSB	0.750383	0.751444	0.749104	0.763227
Mobile App Functionality	0.773386	0.721554	0.795132	0.754761
Mobile App Design	0.744381	0.701386	0.765873	0.734203

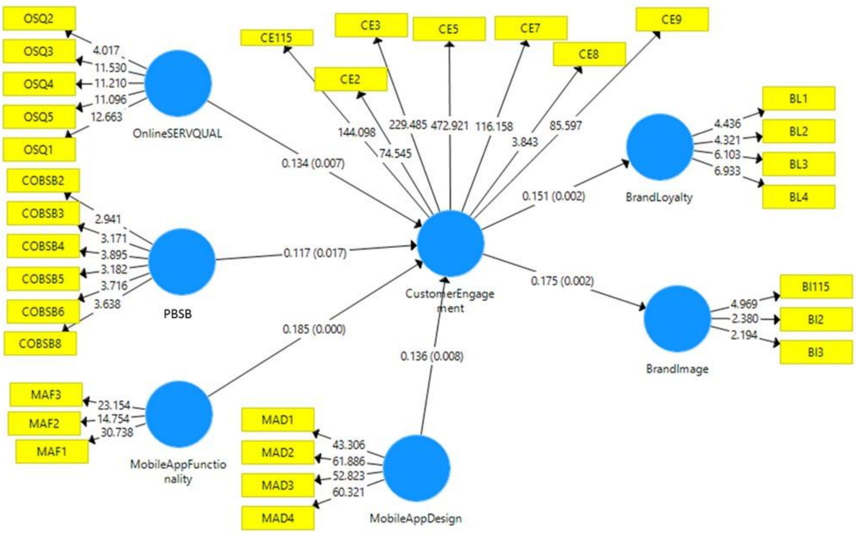


Figure 1: Research Model (SEM Output)

Table 6: Structural Model Findings

Hyp	**Hypothesized paths**	***β***	**95%CI LL**	**95%CI UL**
H1a	PEBSB => Customer Engagement => Brand Image	0.019	-0.006	0.046
H1b	PEBSB => Customer Engagement => Brand Loyalty	0.016	-0.005	0.042
H2a	Online SERVQUAL => Customer Engagement => Brand Image	0.022	0.007	0.047
H2b	Online SERVQUAL => Customer Engagement => Brand Loyalty	0.018	0.006	0.04
H3a	Mobile App Design => Customer Engagement => Brand Image	0.022	0.005	0.046
H3b	Mobile App Design => Customer Engagement => Brand Loyalty	0.019	-0.004	0.044
H4a	Mobile App Function => Customer Engagement => Brand Image	0.032	0.013	0.064
H4b	Mobile App Function => Customer Engagement => Brand Loyalty	0.027	0.012	0.06

Table 7: Sufficient configurations towards Brand Image

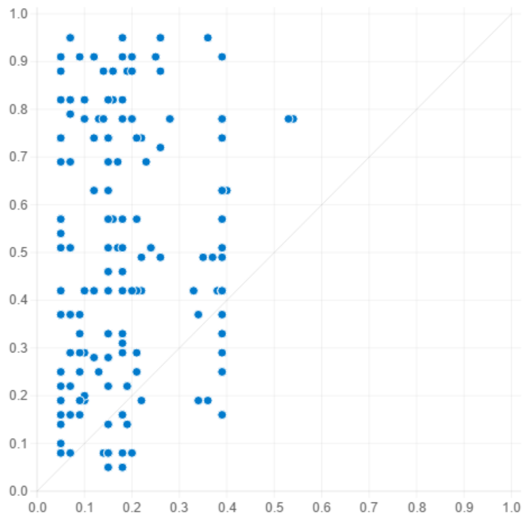
Configuration	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency	Description: Causal recipe conditions for high Brand Image
Configurations for the high level of Brand Image= *f*(Online SERVQUAL, Customer Engagement, PEBSB, Mobile App Functionality, Mobile App Design)				
~Online SERVQUAL*Mobile App Functionality	0.516296	0.00582421	0.804253	Customers that perceive high mobile app functionality may still have a high brand image even if the brand’s online service quality is not exceptional
Online SERVQUAL*PEBSB	0.607366	0.00152951	0.8346	With the presence of online service quality and perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors, customers will have a high brand image.
PEBSB*Mobile App Functionality	0.638605	0.00152963	0.834872	When the mobile app has high functionality and perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors are perceived, customers will have a high brand image.
Online SERVQUAL* Mobile App Design	0.591364	0.00088239	0.82084	When the mobile app design is good and customers experience high online service quality they will have a high brand image
Solution coverage- 0.942582; Solution consistency- 0.641188				

Table 8: Sufficient configurations towards Brand Loyalty

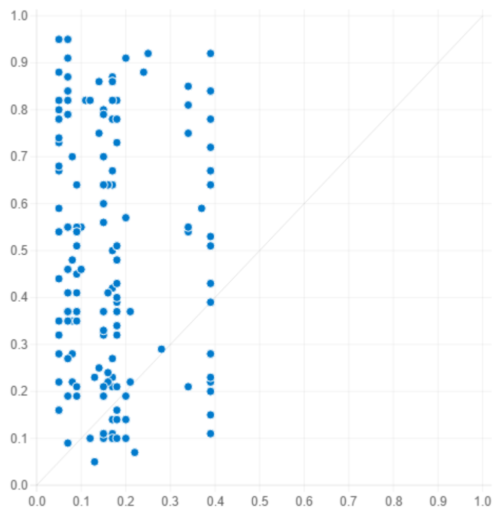
Configuration	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**	**Description: Causal recipe conditions for high Brand Loyalty**
Configurations for the high level of Brand Loyalty= *f*(Online SERVQUAL, Customer Engagement, PEBSB, Mobile App Functionality, Mobile App Design)				
~Online SERVQUAL*Mobile App Functionality	0.521106	0.0102346	0.82588	Customers that perceive high mobile app functionality may still have a high brand loyalty even if the brand's online service quality is not exceptional
Online SERVQUAL* PEBSB	0.600613	0.00104076	0.839693	With the presence of online service quality and perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors, customers will have high brand loyalty.
PEBSB*Mobile App Functionality	0.635365	0.00213945	0.845101	Customers that perceive perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors and experience high mobile app functionality will have a high brand loyalty
Online SERVQUAL* Mobile App Design	0.585116	0.00225508	0.826311	When the mobile app design is good and customers experience high online service quality they will have a high brand loyalty
Mobile App Functionality* Mobile App Design	0.659073	0.017983	0.84311	When the mobile app design is good and customers perceive high app functionality, they have a high brand image
Solution coverage- 0.948017; Solution consistency- 0.656115				

Table 9: Sufficient configurations of brand image and brand loyalty from subsample 1

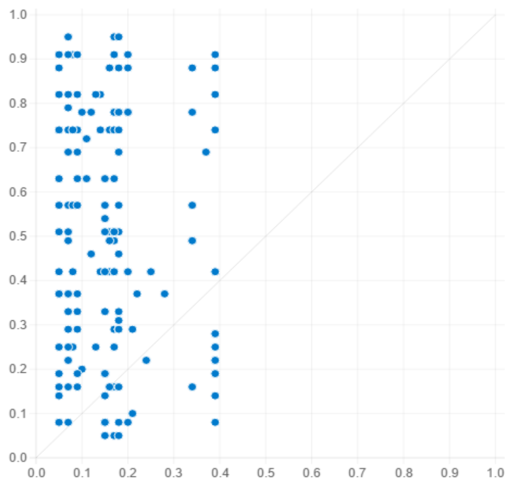
Configuration	**Raw coverage**	**Unique coverage**	**Consistency**	**Description: Causal recipe conditions for high Brand Image**
Configurations for the high level of Brand Image= *f*(Online SERVQUAL, Customer Engagement, PEBSB, Mobile App Functionality, Mobile App Design)				
Customer Engagement*~PEBSB*Mobile App Design	0.464189	0.0128246	0.846581	With customer engagement and an exceptional mobile design, even in the presence of low perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors, customers will have a high brand image and brand loyalty
Customer Engagement*PEBSB* ~Mobile App Design	0.38235	0.0074991	0.813035	With customer engagement and perceived employee boundary-spanning behaviors, customers will have a high brand image and brand loyalty even in the presence of poor mobile app design
Solution coverage- 0.922183; Solution consistency- 0.698067				



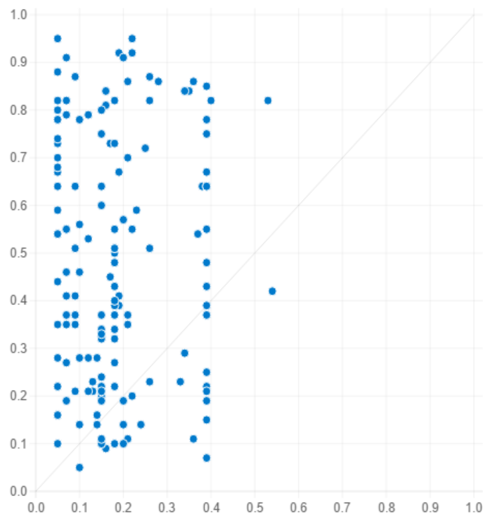
Customer Engagement*~PEBSB*Mobile App Design predicting brand image (Consistency- 0.926587; Coverage- 0.359369)



Customer Engagement*PEBSB* ~Mobile App Design predicting brand loyalty (Consistency- 0.912904; Coverage- 0.324365)



Customer Engagement*PEBSB* ~Mobile App Design predicting brand image (Consistency- 0.887664; Coverage- 0.320251)



Customer Engagement*~PEBSB*Mobile App Design predicting brand loyalty (Consistency- 0.915013; Coverage- 0.3495)

Figure 2: Predictive Validity based on subsample 2

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

The outcome of the data analyzed confirmed the study's hypotheses and as a result conclusions were made based on this. The data analyzed in this research revealed that all of the hypotheses where supported and this entails that there is a positive relationship between perceived employee boundary span behavior, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. In addition to this, the analyses also showed that there is a positive relationship between online service quality, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. Furthermore, the analyzed showed that there is a positive relationship between mobile application design, brand image and brand loyalty with the mediating role of customer engagement. Finally, the results of the data analysis also show a positive relationship between mobile application functionality, brand loyalty and brand image with the mediating role of customer engagement.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings from this research revealed that in order for restaurants to improve their brand image and brand loyalty they must improve their online service quality and design mobile application in which users order food in such a way that it's easier to use and easily accessible. Also, restaurants need to make sure that perceived employee boundary span behavior does not have negative impact on customer engagement. Furthermore, the findings from this research reveals that restaurants need to take into cognizance the pivotal role that customer engagement plays in the enhancement of brand image and brand loyalty.

This research is applicable to restaurants across the globe and is equally applicable to other services of the tourism and hospitality sector which offer similar services. Future research can be carried out to examine other mediating variables on the enhancement of brand image and loyalty as well as the role of affective commitment in such a relationship. In light of the pandemic, it is imperative for restaurant management to invest more in online service delivery.

5.3 Contribution to Theory

Firstly this study reveals the role that social exchange theory plays in relation to employee boundary spanning and how it can be used to explain the behaviors of boundary spanning employees, therefore, it contributes to the limited literature on perceived employee boundary span behavior. Secondly, this study extended literature by revealing how customer engagement can be better understood, for instance, this research alludes to how social exchange theory can be used to better under customer engagement and can be used to enhance it. Thirdly the findings from this study shows the benefits of quality online service delivery, and therefore adds to the growing literature on the online provision of services as the study also examined online services quality within the context of social exchange theory.

5.4 Contribution to Practice

The research recommends that restaurant management and those that offer similar services in the tourism and hospitality sector should seek to enhance brand image and brand loyalty in light of the pandemic. This can be done through moving a bulk of in person services to online services where applicable. Additionally, this can be done through improving the quality of online services and designing mobile applications in which users order food and make reservations in such a way that it’s easier to navigate and quickly accessible 24/7 in its function as this is likely to satisfy mobile application users. The moderating role of customer engagement entails that restaurant management should seek innovate ways which stimulate customer engagement outside transactions. Finally the research also recommends management to train and support internal employees in light of the pandemic as everyone has face negative psychological effects which may hinder their ability to engage customers politely or correctly.

5.5 Research Shortcomings and Future Opportunities

Like many other thesis, this study had its fair share of limitations. Although the research strived to gather data most relevant to this study within the available resources and materials, it should be acknowledged that as a result of time constraints and movement restrictions imposed by the pandemic, this study used cross-sectional data which was collected through the use of an online survey. Additionally, as a result of time constraints, other variables such as affective commitment could not be explored within the course of this study therefore it is imperative for future studies to include affective commitment in examining a similar research question.

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APPENDIX

Survey Questionnaire

Dear Respondent,

This research is aimed to better understand your experiences using mobile applications to order food in a restaurant. Therefore, we kindly request that you self-administer this questionnaire. The average duration for filling this survey is between 10-15 minutes.

There are no right or wrong answers in this questionnaire. Any sort of information collected during our research will be kept confidential. We appreciate your time and participation in our research very much.

If you have any questions about our research, please do not hesitate to contact Mutsa Esther Tenhedza through her e-mail address: mtenhedza@gmail.com

Thank you for your kind cooperation.

SECTION I

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Seven-point scale:

(1) I strongly Disagree

(2) I Disagree

(3) Somewhat Disagree

(4) Undecided

(5) Somewhat Agree

(6) I Agree

(7) I strongly Agree

	I Strongly Disagree	I Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	I Agree	I Strongly Agree
1. The restaurant serves food exactly as I ordered it							
2. This restaurant makes you feel comfortable and confident in your dealings with them							
3. The restaurant provides prompt and quick service							
4. This restaurant has a visually attractive physical facilities or appearances							
5. The restaurant anticipates my individual needs and wants							

SECTION II

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Five-point scale:

(1) Strongly Disagree

(2) Disagree

(3) Undecided

(4) Agree

(5) Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. The contact employee tells me the restaurant is a great place to work					
7. The contact employee generate favourable goodwill for this organization					
8. The contact employee says good things about this organization to others					
9. The contact employee make constructive suggestions for service improvements					
10. The contact employee share creative solutions to problems					
11. The contact employee l follow up promptly to customer requests and problems					
12. Regardless of circumstances the contact employee are exceptionally courteous and respectful					
13. The contact employee follow-through in a conscientious manner on promises					

SECTION III

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Seven-point scale:

(1) I strongly Disagree

(2) I Disagree

(3) Somewhat Disagree

(4) Undecided

(5) Somewhat Agree

(6) I Agree

(7) I strongly Agree

	I Strongly Disagree	I Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	I Agree	I Strongly Agree
14. It is possible to order food quickly from restaurant using mobile applications							
15. It is possible to do mobile payment via mobile applications							
16. The function of the mobile application enables various actions via touch-screening (e.g. press, bend,zoom in/out).							
17. I can easily find the food I desire on the mobile application I am currently using because the content of the mobile application has a convenience interface.							
18. I can easily browse/navigate around the mobile application because the content of the mobile application has a convenience interface.							

19. The visual appeal of a mobile application is important for me because it influences my choice of food or restaurant.							
20. The visual design of a mobile application is important for me because it influences my choice of food or restaurant.							

SECTION IV

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Five-point scale:

(1) Strongly Disagree

(2) Disagree

(3) Undecided

(4) Agree

(5) Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
21. When someone criticizes this restaurant, it feels like a personal insult					
22. When I talk about this restaurant, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they’.					
23. When someone praises this restaurant, it feels like a personal compliment.					

24. I am passionate about this restaurant.					
25. I feel excited about this restaurant.					
26. Anything related to this restaurant grabs my attention.					
27. When I am interacting with the restaurant, I forget everything else around me.					
28. In my interaction with the restaurant, I am immersed.					
29. In general, I like to get involved in the discussion about the restaurant.					
30. I am someone who enjoys interacting with like-minded others in relation to the restaurant.					
31. I often participate in activities related to the restaurant.					

SECTION V

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Seven-point scale:

(1) I strongly Disagree

(2) I Disagree

(3) Somewhat Disagree

(4) Undecided

(5) Somewhat Agree

(6) I Agree

(7) I strongly Agree

	I Strongly Disagree	I Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Undecided	Somewhat Agree	I Agree	I Strongly Agree
32. I would say positive things about this restaurant to other people							
33. I would recommend this restaurant to someone who seeks my advice.							
34. I would encourage friends and relatives to do business with this restaurant							
35. I would do more business with this restaurant in the next few years.							

SECTION VI

Please indicate your disagreement or agreement with each statement by crossing the number using the following Five-point scale:

(1) Strongly Disagree

(2) Disagree

(3) Undecided

(4) Agree

(5) Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
36. This restaurant's brand possesses complete practical functions (services and adequate facilities)					
37. This restaurant's brand possesses a positive symbolic meaning (good reputation, credibility and positive image)					
38. I feel that this restaurant's brand can provides me with pleasant service experience					

SECTION VII

Please indicate your answer by placing a ( ) in the appropriate alternative.

How old are you?

- 18 – 27
- 28- 37
- 38 – 47
- 48 – 57

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

What is the highest level of education you completed?

- Primary School
- Secondary School
- Vocational School
- University First Degree
- Master or Ph.D. Degree

Nationality?

____

What is your marital status?

- Single or Divorced
- Married

Thank you for your kind cooperation