

Studying the Impact of Frontline Employees on Brand Engagement and Loyalty (Mediated by Customer Satisfaction)

Serageldin S. M. Zain¹, Adel Zayed²

^{1,2}Children Cancer Hospital 57357, Egypt ESLSCA University, Egypt

ABSTRACT: In this literature review, the important role played by frontline workers in promoting brand loyalty in the services industry is assessed. The problem being investigated is the absence of research evidence illustrating how frontline employees affects brand loyalty and the degree of customer satisfaction in the process. It is suggested that frontline employees have a great effect on customer satisfaction, which in turn affects brand loyalty. A thorough examination of relevant literature sources was carried out, considering research studies that focus on the analysis of frontline employees' interaction with customers, emphasizing the importance of service quality and employee involvement.

According to the analysis of existing studies, frontline employees play a crucial role in the development of good customer experience, which increases customer satisfaction and loyalty. Besides, the behaviors of frontline workers that promote brand engagement were identified, including empathy, communication, and problem-solving skills. These results suggest that the investment in frontline workers should be considered an important factor in building brand credibility and integrity.

Based on the results obtained, it can be concluded that frontline employees need to be prioritized in organizational development practices.

KEYWORDS: Frontline employees; Customer satisfaction; Brand loyalty; Service quality; Brand engagement; Customer experience; Global business

INTRODUCTION

Brand loyalty plays a major role in business success by helping companies keep customers, build brand value, and increase profits (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). While product quality and price are still important, recent studies highlight the value of human interaction, especially the role of front-line employees (Hennig-Thurau, 2004). Customer satisfaction is a key driver of brand loyalty, and front-line employees who work directly with customers are crucial in shaping how satisfied customers feel (Bitner et al., 2019). As the main representatives of a brand, front-line staff are important points of contact and have a strong influence on how customers see and experience the brand (Zeithaml, Bitner, Gremler, 2017). Their skills in providing great service, building relationships, and solving problems can have a big effect on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, Berry, 1988).

Even though front-line employees are known to play a big part in customer satisfaction, there has not been much focus on how they directly affect brand loyalty. There is still a gap in understanding how the actions and attitudes of front-line employees help keep customers loyal over time, since most research has looked at branding strategies, product features, and customer opinions (Kandampully, Zhang, Jaakkola, 2018). This gap is even more noticeable in service industries, where personal interactions have a bigger effect on customer choices (Wirtz Lovelock, 2016).

As it becomes harder for companies to stand out through their products alone, marketers are focusing more on customer experience to keep customers loyal (Lemon Verhoef, 2016). Front-line staff are key to shaping this experience because they often interact with customers first and most often (Bitner, 1990). Their ability to show company values, make experiences personal, and quickly meet customer needs helps fight negative views of the brand (Homburg, Jozić, Kuehnl, 2017). The impressions customers get from these interactions can shape how they see the brand overall, especially now that social media and online reviews have a big impact on decisions (Verhoef, 2003). Because of this, front-line staff do more than just provide service—they also build relationships that encourage long-term brand support and loyalty (Kandampully et al., 2018).

Front-line employees help build brand loyalty and also shape how customers see the brand's trustworthiness and authenticity. What they do has a big impact on whether customers feel the brand lives up to its promises (Morhart et al., 2015). For many customers, their only direct contact with a company is through its staff, so these moments are important for creating emotional and psychological bonds.

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When front-line employees show empathy, pay attention, and act professionally, it shows what the company values and how committed it is to its brand (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010).

The influence of front-line The impact of front-line employees has grown with the rise of digital platforms, social media, and new technologies. Good customer experiences are often shared online, which helps promote the brand, while bad experiences can spread quickly and harm a company's reputation (He et al., 2020). Because of this, front-line staff not only represent the brand in person but also help shape how it is seen online and on social media. This is especially true in industries like hospitality, retail, and banking, where customer opinions are shaped more by personal service than by other branding efforts (Yoo et al., 2018).

Finally, It is important to understand how front-line employees affect customer loyalty in both face-to-face and digital settings. as training and empowerment significantly influence the ability of front-line staff to deliver high-quality customer service. Companies that achieve a competitive advantage through front-line performance are those that invest in employee development, provide continuous support, and cultivate a culture of accountability.

I. Research Problem: Since frontline employees are a customer's first point of contact with a business, they bear a great deal of responsibility for shaping the customer's opinion of the brand. Additionally, it is demonstrated that these employees play a significant role in raising consumer satisfaction levels, which in turn is recognized as a crucial mediator in the processes of brand loyalty. There is a dearth of empirical data demonstrating the role of frontline staff in brand loyalty, despite the fact that studies have demonstrated a substantial correlation between service quality and consumer happiness. To what extent do frontline staff members contribute to brand loyalty? Does the link between frontline staff and brand loyalty depend on customer satisfaction?

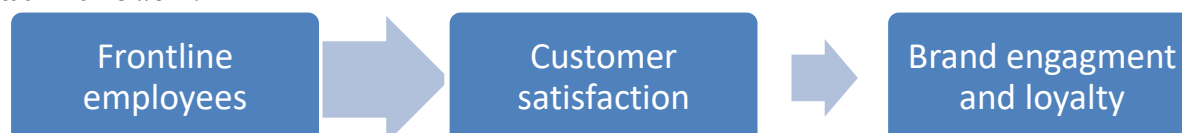
II. Research Objective: The primary goal of this study is to investigate and evaluate how frontline staff affect brand loyalty. The essay will give readers a thorough grasp of the crucial role frontline staff play in providing services and the relationship between “frontline employees, quality of service, customer satisfaction, brand engagement and loyalty.”

III. Research Variables: Independent variable: Frontline employee Dependant variable: Brand loyalty Mediator: Customer satisfaction

IV. Research Questions:In this study, the researcher will write a literature review to answer the following questions:

- What is the relationship between the frontline employee and brand loyalty?
- What is the level of customer satisfaction that leads to engagement and loyalty?

Conceptual Frame work:



V. Research Keywords: Frontline employee, service quality, customer satisfaction, brand loyalty

A. Frontline Employee:

Services are often closely linked to the people who provide them. In many industries, the service provider is a person. When something goes wrong, frontline employees act as the link between clients and the company. These staff members should be directly responsible for producing, delivering, and value co-creating (VCC) because they work where the organization meets the customer.

Value co-creation (VCC) happens when employees and customers work together to create value by sharing their resources, like knowledge and skills. While these abilities help during service interactions, they are not enough on their own. Everyone involved needs to be motivated to use their knowledge and skills together, since these resources do not create value by themselves. Research shows that people are often motivated to take part in service interactions because of their own needs or experiences. Expectancy theory says that people put in effort when they expect to get meaningful rewards (Amin, Shamim and Bin Ghazali, 2021).

B. Customer Satisfaction:

In this context, integrity means how someone thinks or feels when responding to a rating procedure. This sense of integrity comes from what is most important to the person, which is influenced by their expectations, experiences, and what they use for comparison. The timing of their reaction also affects the integrity of their response (Guido, 2015).

C. Brand Loyalty:

Loyalty shows how strongly consumer attitudes connect to their regular buying habits. It includes purchase loyalty, which means returning to the same store or buying the same brand, and attitude loyalty, which is a deeper commitment to a brand or retailer.

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People develop purchase loyalty when they have good experiences and want to repeat them. Attitude loyalty is more involved, as it leads people to support a brand, recommend it, and even pay more because they see special value in it. When experiences meet customers' desires for enjoyment, they feel more satisfied, which makes them more likely to speak positively about the brand and build a strong connection with it. As a result, brand personification can affect how happy consumers feel and how likely they are to stay loyal, recommend the brand, or buy again (Braxton and Lau-Gesk, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

I. The Role of Frontline Employees in Shaping Customer Experiences

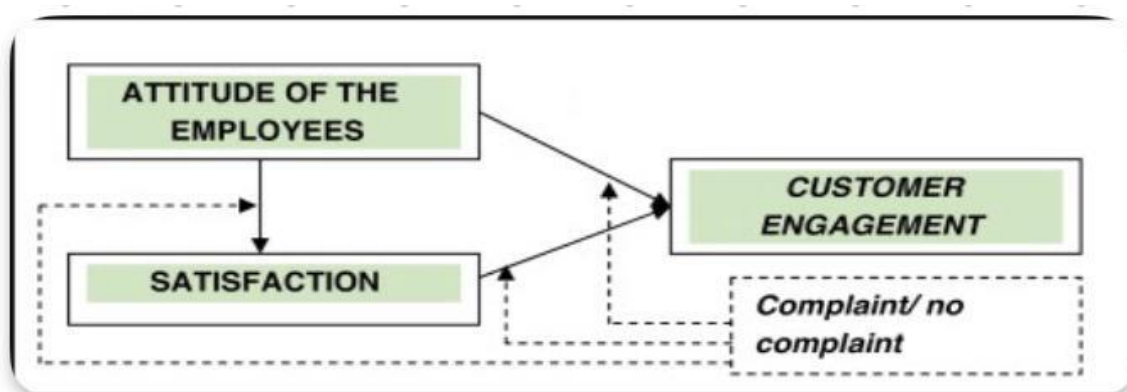
Frontline employees represent the company when they interact with customers and often handle public relations tasks. They provide services, share information, show how to use products, handle complaints, apologize when needed, suggest solutions, and collect feedback. These actions are crucial for the company's success now and in the future. How frontline staff respond to customer questions is one of the most effective ways to communicate. Customers often trust information from frontline employees more than from any other source (Cambra-Fierro, Vázquez-Carrasco, Melero-Polo, 2014).

In service industries, how frontline employees communicate with clients strongly shapes how customers see the quality of service and how satisfied they feel. This is partly because services can't be separated from the people who provide them, and frontline staff both deliver the service and communicate with customers. Because of this, organizations should focus on managing performance, since frontline employees play a key role in how services are judged. It is also important to support and encourage positive attitudes among these workers (Cambra-Fierro, Vázquez-Carrasco, Melero-Polo, 2014).

Customer satisfaction relies on factors like polite and respectful service, employee effort, product knowledge, clear communication, empathy, and good problem-solving. To keep customers happy, service should meet or go beyond what they expect. When something goes wrong, the ways companies handle these issues are called 'service failure processes.' In these moments, how frontline employees act is very important. They need to handle complaints well, apologize, and suggest solutions. The speed, energy, and sincerity they show can make a big difference in how satisfied customers feel, even if the outcome is not perfect. Research shows there is a positive link between how employees behave and how customers rate their satisfaction (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).

Even with major advances in technology, telecommunications, and virtual services, employee-customer engagement is still crucial and shapes the customer experience. Many people still prefer face-to-face interactions over virtual ones, especially when seeking information, which shows how important personal contact remains. Since human resources are key parts of the value chain, organizations should pay attention to how people work together and coordinate across functions to achieve the best results and keep customers happy. In marketing, frontline staff have many chances to connect with customers. These moments are not just about how services are provided, but also about learning what customers need, checking their satisfaction, and building relationships. This feedback is very important for the company's future growth (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).

As discussed above, employees often represent the company and their attitude can encourage customers to give positive feedback, recommend the business, or stay involved. When service contracts last a long time, customer satisfaction might not be clear until the contract ends or if problems show up early. In these cases, how employees interact with customers plays a big role in whether customers stay engaged. So, in service businesses, a positive attitude from employees can make a real difference in customer satisfaction (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).



The above figure illustrates the relation between the frontline employee attitude and the customer satisfaction and engagement. (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco,2014)

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II. The Mediating Role of Customer Satisfaction

The theory suggests that consumers need to feel satisfied enough to stay with a company, show loyalty, speak well of it, and recommend it to others. These actions show their involvement and commitment (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).

A consumer's existing attitude shapes what they expect from a service. After using the service, they compare their expectations to what actually happened. If there is a difference, it leads to either positive or negative feelings. Customers then try to figure out why there was a difference, which affects how satisfied they feel. Depending on what they think caused the outcome, they may change their level of dissatisfaction and how they act next. Recent studies show that people make these attributions after noticing a difference and before feeling dissatisfied. Unlike older models, new research supports a sequence where attribution comes before feelings and behavior. Finally, satisfaction with the service shapes how customers see the overall quality, which then influences actions like recommending the service, switching providers, or staying loyal (Bitner, 1990).

Engagement is a recent term in the relational marketing and customer management literature. The term is conceptualized as the actions of the customer towards the company, which is read beyond buying and rebuying of products and services. In particular, non-transactional behaviour - or disengaged customer behaviour - with a long-term impact on business performance should be charged to the sales transaction. The strength of the customer's behavioral commitment to the business is known as engagement. With this bond, this knot helps to both acquire new customers and to retain the existing ones. Since the customer-company relationship and the relationship between these are the core of engagement, engagement requires ongoing and persistent communication, such as across time. Words like absorption, involvement, connection, and participation are utilized. In business interaction, participatory experience and co-creation of the customer are also highlighted. (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014)

In services, we believe that employees play a key role in both customer satisfaction and how engaged customers feel with the company (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).

We can therefore say that a positive attitude on the part of the employees in the employee--customer interface in the service industry setting can generate customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction has a positive, significant effect on the level of engagement of the customers, which may yield tremendous value to the company at a non-transactional basis. Finally, we analyzed if there was any direct relationship between the attitude of the employees and the level of customer engagement. This is important because it indicates that their interaction with customers directly influences the level of engagement. (Cambra-Fierro, Melero-Polo, Vázquez-Carrasco, 2014).

III. The Impact of Frontline Employee Behaviours on Brand engagement and Loyalty

When products are very similar and price is the main difference, authentic human interactions can give businesses an edge. A sincere and personal approach can turn a simple contract into a meaningful relationship. Seeing customers as people first helps organizations meet their needs more effectively (Bowen, 2015).

Lately, there has been more focus on the value of real human interactions, especially when staff are honest during important moments with customers. Researchers call this "calculated honesty," which creates a unique way for employees to connect with customers. Studies show that closeness and genuine care from employees help build customer loyalty. Losing frontline staff, who set businesses apart, can hurt performance. High turnover among service workers also leads to worse customer experiences and can affect how people see the brand and future profits (Bowen, 2015).

In hospitality, service is key to meeting client expectations and keeping the business running. Customers often spend more time with service providers here than in industries like retail or banking. In hotels, guests usually stay more than one night and interact with many staff members. Research shows that these employee--customer interactions strongly shape the overall experience, affecting satisfaction and whether customers return (Kandampully, Zhang, Jaakkola, 2018).

It has been studied that social cues which incorporate the image of the retail brand act as organisms that positively influence the customer's cognition. Studies show that social cues tied to a retail brand's image can positively shape how customers think and feel about the brand, making them more likely to engage. In daily life, people form relationships with brands, which then become active parts of their lives. This relationship grows through ongoing interaction. Many retailers use their store environment to express their brand's identity (Braxton and Lau-Gesk, 2020)

Brand personification helps consumers understand complex or unfamiliar ideas, making it easier for them to build strong connections with brands, much like they do with people. Companies have long used both human and non-human mascots to create these personified brands. Marketers often use anthropomorphism, which means giving human traits to non-human things, to make brands feel like social companions. Studies show that people who feel socially excluded tend to prefer brands that seem more human, likely because they want to feel like they belong. This kind of social connection can make customers feel included, improve how satisfied they are, and increase their trust in the brand. Brand personification also applies to employees who interact

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with customers, as they act as brand mascots and represent the brand together. In addition, how staff look and behave can shape how consumers view retail brands and the quality of service they provide (Braxton and Lau-Gesk, 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the status of service employees in organizations changed in the early 2000s, especially when value creation became a key measure. This change points to a decline in employee status as technology takes over many traditional service roles. Also, research in employee studies, management, and HR has rarely focused on how individuals affect customer service efficiency. While the idea of service quality has expanded, it is still mainly discussed in marketing, where it is linked to customer satisfaction, service quality, client experience, and loyalty (Bowen, 2015).

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