ASSOCIATE ENGAGEMENT, CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, AND THE IMPACT ON THE SHOPPING EXPERIENCE

by

Deborah Hufford

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Business Administration

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Abstract

This qualitative case study focuses on levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the customer shopping experience. The qualitative research presents a case study design that looks to develop an understanding of how the different levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction will impact the shopping experience, which could result in a loss of future revenue through reduced future visits and decreased spending. It addresses the general problem of low levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the impact on the customer shopping experience. This research looks to question how important customers perceive levels of associate engagement when they are shopping in Walmart. A survey for Walmart customers and associates and one-on-one interviews were used to ask questions that would answer the issue. This researcher used NVivo software to code the data that was collected and also used preexisting literature to substantiate the findings. The results of this study show that the levels of associate engagement are a driving factor in customer satisfaction and in creating a positive shopping experience. Customers want to feel valued and welcome when they shop, and they look to associates to provide that through engagement. It was found that often it is more important to a customer to be acknowledged then quality of product received. Customers were willing to overlook lack of selection and lower quality if they received engagement and acknowledgement from store associates.

Keywords: customer satisfaction, associate, levels of engagement, perceptions, shopping experience
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Edward M. Moore Ph.D., Director of Doctoral Programs Date
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all those that have sacrificed with me on this journey.
Acknowledgements

First to God, I know that this journey was only possible because of you and without you I am nothing. You provided the light at the end of the tunnel and always helped me in the times that I wanted to quit the most. Lifting my spirit and showing me the way through scriptures, prayers, and visions. Thank you for loving me enough to inspire me to put the words on paper for this dissertation.

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Section 1: Foundation of Study

This study sought to address low levels of associate engagement and the effect this had on customer satisfaction. According to Karanika-Murray et al. (2015), “Enhanced employee engagement can be both mental and physical, reflecting the attitudinal and behavioral elements of the concept” (p. 1021). Employee satisfaction was the path to customer satisfaction, so by keeping employees satisfied and engaged organizations will in turn improve customer satisfaction (Jung & Yoon, 2013). Associate engagement has the potential to promote good customer service as well as a positive shopping experience for the customers who are interacting with the associates.

The topic of associate engagement was examined by investigating and exploring the relationship between associate engagement and customer satisfaction as low levels of associate engagement are a contributing factor to customer satisfaction (Barnes et al., 2014). The individuals that were included in the study were the retail associates and customers from Walmart.

Background of Problem

The big box retailers have been around since the early 1960’s. However, it was not until late in the 1970’s that they started to really see the impact they could make on communities (Crowley & Stanback, 2019). Early on, retailers such as Walmart were able to lower cost and drive profitability often running the smaller chains out of business. This gave them an advantage as well as a larger market share of consumers (Crowley & Stanback, 2019). As Walmart continued to grow and evolve, it became necessary to focus on customer satisfaction as a way to continue to increase profits (Castillo, 2017). Positive customer and associate interaction were vital to the success of a retail organization. In an era when many organizations are moving away
from the traditional brick and mortar establishment, customer satisfaction plays a bigger role not only in increased revenues but also in customer loyalty (Castillo, 2018).

According to Barnes et al. (2014), low levels of associate engagement can play a role in a customer having a negative shopping experience. According to Morillo et al. (2015), associate engagement is perceived as always being a problem for Walmart, the world’s largest retailer with over 10,000 stores worldwide and $460 billion in revenue as of 2013.

Walmart has built its core values around ensuring that customers in its stores are satisfied and have a good or satisfying shopping experience. Walmart’s core values are (a) service to the customer, (b) respect for the individual, (c) strive for excellence, and (d) act with integrity (Walmart.com, 2020). Walmart’s core values reflect its intentions, however, sometimes it falls short of meeting the needs of customers. This is reflected in negative feedback from customers. That is evident because Walmart was rated at the very bottom of all grocery retail establishments in all aspects of customer service and overall customer satisfaction (Reich, 2016).

As the way that customers shop continues to evolve from online to curbside pick-up, Walmart is going to need to find ways to continuously drive efforts in the area of customer satisfaction in order to gain and maintain customer loyalty. Retailers must look to further engage their associates in customer interaction to help with the overall customer experience (Barnes et al., 2014). According to Bagdare (2015), a positive shopping experience was often inspired when a customer felt emotionally touched in some way and retailers have shifted their focus to engagement in order to meet this need, (Bagdare, 2015).

**Problem Statement**

The general problem that was to be addressed was the low level of engagement from associates resulting in customers being dissatisfied with their shopping experience. There is a
conflict between the level of customer service expected and the low level of customer service that is actually being provided (Cain et al., 2018). The low levels of associate engagement are hurting the organizations’ productivity, the economy of the communities the organization served, and the degree of customer satisfaction that is provided (Menguc et al., 2017). The existing lower level of engagement creates a shopping experience that does not meet the expectations of the customer (Myrden & Kelloway, 2015). The specific problem that was to be addressed was the low level of engagement from the associates in Walmart, which results in a loss of revenue, because of dissatisfaction with the customer shopping experience.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to add to the literature by exploring the different levels of associate engagement with customers and the way engagement impacted a customer’s perspective on their shopping experience. While investigating the levels of associate engagement has gained popularity in recent years, there is still no definitive measure used to determine what is the appropriate level of engagement (Shuck et al., 2017).

This study incorporated the concepts of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The customers of Walmart were asked to share their experiences while shopping in the retail establishment. Interview questions were open-ended to allow customers and associates to share their experiences. This conceptual framework of the case study research model allowed customers and associates to share real life experiences.

**Nature of the Study**

Qualitative studies are experimental, interpretive, situational, personal, and if conducted well are also well triangulated (Stake, 2010). The qualitative method was the best choice when seeking to understand perceptions and experience of a specific group of individuals. According
to Campbell (2014), qualitative research consists of collecting open-ended data that is then used to develop a theme that is exploratory in nature and will help to develop an area that has not been explored entirely. This research method explored the interactions between customers and associates and how those interactions influence the customer’s overall shopping experience from a personal perspective.

Quantitative studies consist of numerical data and looks for a single truth. It can be confirmed through findings and is not interpretative like qualitative studies. Another characteristic of quantitative studies is that the majority of information is gathered before the research is conducted, this type of study is used for a lot of medical studies (Leppink, 2017). Unlike qualitative studies, quantitative methods are very broad in nature and replication is on relative to this type of study (Leppink, 2017). The quantitative method was not selected because the study used personal experiences and interactions as the basis of research.

Mixed method studies are a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This design tends to add value for graduate study understanding as it also allows for the collection of two different types of data (McKim, 2015). Mixed method research was not selected because there was not a single truth to be discovered and the data could not be replicated due to being human experiences that changed with each encounter. The researcher selected a qualitative method because it allowed for the collection of data in the actual environment that was being researched and it helped to not only interpret but also bring about clarity and understanding to a subjective experience (Cypress, 2015). The qualitative method was used to help gain understanding of the personal perspective of the customers as it pertained to their shopping experience.
The design selected for this study was case study research which allowed the researcher to focus on a specific group of individuals and their experiences (Moriarty et al., 2019). The researcher used interview questions of the experiences and interactions between customers and associates that work at Walmart. In the evaluation phase of the project, an analysis of data was conducted to understand what constituted a positive shopping experience (Cachero-Martínez & Vázquez-Casielles, 2017). The case study strategy was the best technique to collect and break down information incrementally because it allowed for the researcher to collect data at different locations, times, and at different levels (Lan et al., 2016). With the case study, the researcher had the opportunity of applying various strategies to gather the required information to evaluate how different levels of engagement can impact a customer’s shopping experience (Maslowska et al., 2015).

Phenomenological research is conducted by explaining the common meaning of an experience or series of experiences that were shared for a specific group of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative research is similar to phenomenological research as it looks at the lived experiences of either an individual or a group of individuals to develop an understanding of why something takes place and the effect that it has on the individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While both phenomenological and narrative designs both use interviews from participants for research, the researcher decided not to use these two methods because there was not one specific phenomenon or group of individuals that are affected by the low level of engagement.

Grounded theory research is conducted by researching specific processes or procedures in a specific phase or order that occurs over a period of time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The method that grounded theory research uses for conducting research is interviews of individuals that go between participants and continuously updating the results of the data gathered to create a
process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher did not select this research method because low level engagement of associates and its effect on customer satisfaction could not be resolved through a specific process.

Ethnography theory research looks to study the behaviors or patterns of several individuals that have similar experiences by focusing on the entire group and looks to interpret the learned behaviors or patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher did not select this method because there was not one specific demographic focused on during the research.

There are limits related to a qualitative case study such as there is no identifiable differences between rare instances and daily occurrences when collecting data, the ambiguities of words related to the study are highly interpretative, and the findings related to the study cannot be extended to a larger population with a certainty that the findings would have the same results (Atieno, 2009). Another issue was that the interpretive nature of this study was subject to researcher bias. Therefore, the researcher was careful to not only look to prove for a preconceived idea, but they were also open to evidence that may be contrary to what they thought was true (Yin, 2018). It was important to remember to be ethical in the collection and analysis of all the data regardless of preconceived thoughts.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research to investigate and explore what role lower levels of engagement play in the customer’s overall shopping experience.

**RQ1.** What level of engagement is required from associates for customers to feel that the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?

**RQ2.** What are the perceptions of customers as they relate to shopping experiences when they encounter associates not engaged with the customer?
RQ3. What is the impact on the shopping experience of customers when associates have recently had a negative interaction with their manager and then attempts to engage with customers?

RQ4. How do the customers feel about their shopping experience when they have a chance to engage in interaction with associates and managers in the retail establishment?

RQ5. What impact does customer’s shopping experience have on their tendency to return to a retail establishment for future spending?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this qualitative case study was a way to tie the project together by affiliating components from the available literature to connect to the study (Creswell, 2013). Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the study concepts of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience.

Figure 1.
*Connection between Associate Engagement, Customer Satisfaction, the Shopping Experience, and Increased Revenue for Walmart.*

The diagram of the conceptual framework was designed to show the how associate engagement impacts customer satisfaction, which as a result has an impact on the customers shopping experience in a retail environment. Each component of the conceptual framework was
explored and researched in literature review, and then add to through this research study. The focus or component was the shopping experience with underlying concepts being associate engagement, and customer satisfaction.

**Associate engagement.** Associate engagement is defined as “an individual employee’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes” (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 103). Associate engagement not only impacts an organization it also impacts the shopping experiences of customers and is often one of the components that will drive the competitiveness and sustainability of the business (Ruck et al., 2017) Associate engagement influences the outcomes of productivity, profitability, and most importantly customer satisfaction (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

**Customer satisfaction.** According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), being able to create a solid customer experience is at the forefront of a leader’s responsibility. The reason that the customer’s experience has become so important is because they have the ability to share their experience among multiple social media channels, and a negative review could be costly for the retail establishment. Customers must be the focal point of a retail establishment because retail establishment have the ability to create long-term sustainability through customer satisfaction (Youssef et al., 2018).

**Shopping experience.** The factors that drive customer satisfaction have evolved with the way the customers shop. For example, customers place more value on the shopping experience than overall quality of the product or service when it comes to the competitive advantage in the retail environment (Roozen & Katidis, 2019). The shopping experience was a driver for creating customer loyalty and repeat business resulting in the creation of sustainability (Menguc et al., 2017).
Associate engagement, customer satisfaction and shopping experience. The customer’s shopping experience has come to be a top priority in the retail environment and, as leaders seek to establish long term relationships with their customer base, they must focus on ensuring the shopping experience of their customers in satisfactory (Roozen & Katidis, 2019). An engaged associate has the ability to drive customer satisfaction and help to create loyal customers. When associates are conscious about the engagement and attitudes towards customers, they have the ability to create a positive shopping experience which in turn helps to develop a loyal customer base (Grewal et al., 2017)

Leadership theory. There are different leadership theories that can be related to the idea that associate engagement impacts customer satisfaction which impacts the customer’s shopping experience. Those theories are ethical leadership, transformational leadership, and servant leadership.

The theory that ethical leadership is related to the levels of associate engagement was discussed by Joplin et al. (2019), who argued, when ethical leadership is low in an organization it can cause associates to feel that they can behave poorly, without repercussions, and they tend to feel a sense of entitlement. It would suffice to say if ethical leadership is present in an organization, then associates would be more than likely engaged at a higher level, and willing to help achieve the goals of the organization. By giving associates a sense of purpose and meaning at work they will help to drive the engagement levels which will impact customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Peng et al., 2016)

The theory of transformational leadership allows leaders to make changes rapidly to align with the values of the organization. When these changes are properly communicated to associates it keeps them engaged and gives a sense of belonging (Cheema et al., 2015). The
motivation behind transformational leadership is driven through intrinsic factors, which are also key drivers in associate engagement. This also helps to create customer satisfaction, which impacts the total shopping experience (Chin et al., 2019).

Servant leaders work with the best interest of their associates in mind and tend to work toward making sure that they are happy and feel appreciated (Bao et al., 2018). The reason that servant leadership relates well to associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience of the customer is that the relationship between the leader and the associate drives the dedication to the organization which drives the customer loyalty through customer satisfaction.

**Summary of conceptual framework.** The shopping experience, a reflection of customer satisfaction, is a vital factor in the retail environment and can be developed through the engagement of associates’ interactions with customers (Grewal et al., 2017). A positive experience is the goal of all retail establishments. Because of widespread expression of opinion on social media, it is more important than ever for retail organizations to make sure that their associates are engaging customers and providing a great shopping experience (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

**Definition of Terms**

**Associate engagement.** Associate engagement is defined as different behaviors such as commitment, participation, cooperation, and upbeat attitude with a continuous process of ensuring invested in the organization and in the concept of customer satisfaction (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

**Customer satisfaction.** Customer satisfaction is defined as the customer’s expectations being met or surpassed in relation to a product, service, or experience (Berraies & Hamouda, 2018).
**Shopping experience.** Shopping experience is defined as a set of events or interactions that takes place between the customer and a product, service, or associate from an organization (Flacandji & Krey, 2020).

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

An assumption is a belief that has not been researched or validated. Qualitative research not only brings understanding, but it also provides insight into the experiences of individuals or groups (Denny & Weckesser, 2018). Qualitative research is often criticized due to the subjectivity and interpretation of individual experiences. With an increased use of current literature, methodical contributions of theory, and existing knowledge, this qualitative study can fill the gaps in the literature available on the subject (Wrona & Gunnesch, 2016) Case study research often relates to a broad study, that is underutilized in research. Case studies can run into limitations when the use of preexisting information is compromises the openness of the research (Wrona & Gunnesch, 2016). The delimitations and boundaries were set in order to control the broadness of the study.

**Assumptions.** This study was based on the concepts of associate engagement and customer satisfaction and whether they have an impact on the shopping experience of the customer. The researcher assumed that the level of associate engagement affects customer satisfaction which had a direct impact on the shopping experience of the customers. According to Andrew and Sofian (2012), associate engagement is linked to organizational success as well as customer satisfaction. The researcher also assumed that those that respond to surveys and interviews provided an accurate assessment and were honest in their responses. Paulhus (1984), stated that participants are likely to be more open and honest if they feel confident that they will remain anonymous. The researcher used the case study method and Walmart as a focus point.
The researcher used surveys and one on one interviews to answer questions related to the shopping experience.

In order to provide assurance of anonymity this researcher ensured that certain perimeters were in place to protect participants such as not publishing any identifying information and keeping all identifying data locked in a cabinet in the researcher’s home office. The researcher also provided an -off-premises location to conduct interviews. The assumption was that it made the participants more comfortable and led to more accurate accounts of shopping experiences and they were more open to talk about specific situations.

**Limitations.** A focus on an individual organization may limit the amount of data gathered. It may limit the amount of knowledge on the broad topic of associate engagement that is able to be collected because of the narrowness of the case study and engagement levels of the associates within the organization. Because engagement levels and expectations may differ from organization to organization the data that is collected may be skewed. This study focuses on Walmart as a retailer specifically and lacks the generalizability to the retail environment from a broader perspective. Because this case study lacks both a quantitative and experimental component it proved to be ineffective as an explanatory research study. In order to mitigate limitations related to the research study this researcher focused specifically on associate engagement, customer service, and the shopping experience. Based on the broad spectrum of Walmart’s involvement in the communities it serves, this research was able to obtain a broad enough sampling to reach saturation.

**Delimitations.** The individuals that were interviewed for this study were limited to Walmart customers and associates. The interviews and surveys were anonymous and voluntary in nature. The researcher used preexisting knowledge and research as part of the base for the
study and looked to add valuable knowledge to the subject in this case study. The primary focus of the study was to be able to explore and investigate the relationship between the concepts of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience.

**Significance of the Study**

The study is important to the field of business because it contributes to the sustainability of businesses as well as the overall shopping experience. The study will add to the literature in that it highlights the importance of associate engagement and customer satisfaction, as it relates to a customer’s shopping experience. Understanding the relationship between associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the shopping experience is important in order for retailers to set themselves apart from other organizations (Cachero-Martinez & Vazquez-Casielles, 2017). This study is even more important to Walmart as it will help it to understand where associate engagement has to improve in order to create customer satisfaction and enhance the overall shopping experience.

**Reduction of gaps.** The gaps that were discussed were the link between the associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the shopping experience. The researcher sought to understand why there is a deep connection between associate engagement and customer satisfaction which impacts the shopping experience. Current literature shows the impact of associate engagement on leadership and retaining associates in business. According to Ahmad and Gao (2018), ethical leadership plays a role in the overall attitudes of associates and impacts their job satisfaction, which translates to whether they stay with their employer or seek new opportunities. There is a direct relationship between leadership, associate engagement, and retention. Associates that are not happy with their leadership team often do not stay with the organization (Book et al., 2019). Currently, there is a limited information on the impact associate
engagement has on customer satisfaction which drives the shopping experience. By understanding the connection between the concepts, the researcher was able to add to the limited literature that exists as well as provide retailers with a tool to not only create customer loyalty by positively impact the shopping experience of their customers.

**Implications for biblical integration.** Associate engagement is tied to biblical literature that is relevant to customer service and satisfaction. Ephesians 6:7-8 (NKJV) says “Rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.” This is a reminder that servicing others is more than just associate engagement. It is also about doing what is right according to the word of God. While the shopping experience is the focus of the study, the impact from customer satisfaction and the engagement level of the associates drive relate well to biblical scriptures: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24).

**Relationship to field of study.** The concepts of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience directly relate to business and are important drivers to the success of retail establishments. The goal of this study was to bring clarity to the impact that associate engagement and customer satisfaction had on the shopping experience of the customer.

**Summary of the significance of the study.** Associate engagement affects customer satisfaction, which in turn has an impact on the customers shopping experience. By the researcher evaluating levels of associate engagement and how this relates to the negative or positive shopping experience, knowledge was discovered that could enhance the way that associate interact with customers and help to increase profitability and create a loyal customer
base. This information will serve to assist Walmart in increasing awareness around the affect that associate engagement has on customer satisfaction and in turn the impact on the shopping experience.

**A Review of Professional and Academic Literature**

An associate’s level of engagement within the organization is a key indicator of what their thoughts are towards the organization in which they work (Ghosh & Swamy, 2014). Associate engagement also plays a role in the impact on customer satisfaction, which drives the customer’s shopping experience. In recent years, different concepts have been developed to help understand the impact that associate engagement and customer satisfaction play in the customer’s shopping experience. The customer shopping experience not only helps to create sustainability within the organization, it also can have a direct impact on customer loyalty. The fact that associate engagement plays such a major role on the shopping experience of the customer gives good indication that it is a vital part of the organizational success (Barnes et al., 2014). When looking at the levels of associate engagement there are many factors that must be considered and evaluated to determine how to improve the engagement levels and assist the organization in creating sustainability and put themselves in the best possible competitive position.

**Associate engagement.** There are many different definitions or interpretations of what associate engagement is and what it means to the retail industry. Cain et al. (2018) define associate engagement as the behaviors of the associates that lead to customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and positive customer shopping experience. According to Shuck and Wollard (2010), the term associate engagement has become more popular in recent years, but the definition remains inconsistent and not conceptualized. This inconsistency has made it difficult
for organizations and industries to understand how to develop processes and strategies to strengthen this concept and create a standardized format by which to enhance this aspect of the organization.

Associate engagement, according to Karanika et al. (2015), is a vital link between the organization that an individual works for and their satisfaction with their job. This brings up some interesting theories about associate engagement and further validates that satisfaction by associates as well as customers is required in order to create a positive shopping experience.

Additionally, according to Menguc et al. (2017), empowered associates lead to engaged customers. The more organizations allow their associates to aid customers independently the more associates feel like they matter to the organization. This allows for higher levels of engagement which will lead to a positive shopping experience for the customer. “Employee engagement refers to emotional and intelligent assurance of personnel to their organization and its accomplishment” (Sharma et al., 2017, p. 146). Associate engagement not only ensures job satisfaction, but it also leads to customer satisfaction, which drives the customer’s shopping experience.

Associate engagement is not only about maintaining a positive attitude while at work, it also relates to mental resilience, high energy, the eagerness to participate, and having a focus on the tasks that one is responsible for completing (Cole, 2015). Associate engagement relates to a state of mind or mindset of being connected to the work environment in a positive way and being willing to participate in order to create a culture of positivity.

Lemon (2019) discussed the concept of associate engagement from a co-creation standpoint. It is a concept that creates a mutually beneficial connection between all levels of associates within an organization rather than being just beneficial for the organization. The belief
is that this concept will not only increase the levels of engagement, it will also help with uphold the values of the organization and create internal collaboration by encouraging all members to contribute the process of communication and strategy (Lemon, 2019).

Globalization. The concept of associate engagement is not new, however, it is evolving with the change in the business world, such as globalization, which is a factor that affects the way that customers shop. Associate engagement has become an important focus for leaders as businesses continue to embrace globalization (Gupta & Sharma, 2016). This continuous improvement process is not only organizational specific but also vital to maintain a competitive advantage in the changing environment (Gupta & Sharma, 2016).

One factor that impacts associate engagement when it pertains to globalization is cultural differences. What is thought to be acceptable in one environment may not be in another, and what is “culturally acceptable” from an engagement standpoint in one environment may not be in another. “Culture explains the values that drive attitudes and behaviors at the individual level, and as such may be an important explanatory mechanism in understanding why the perceived availability of certain job resources may have a differential impact on engagement in different country contexts” (Farndale & Murrer, 2015, p. 611).

The purpose for creating strong associate engagement in a global market is to focus on hiring and retaining valuable associates. It is also to help maintain the competitive edge for the organization in an already tough environment (Taneja et al., 2015). It is up to the leaders of the organization to properly develop and train the associates so that they are both engaged and invested in helping the organization grow and succeed. When an associate is engaged and invested, they tend to be more apt to believe and support the organizational mission, values, and vision.
Rapid advancement of technology is another issue related to associate engagement brought about by globalization. Using technology, associates are able to compare pay, benefits, and rewards with others globally (MacPherson, 2017). This is another method of communication for associates to interact and engage with each other. Human resource leaders believe that technology and associate engagement levels are directly related to one another. Advancements in technology bring about higher level of associate engagement (Tandon, 2018).

**Levels of engagement.** Globally low levels of associate engagement are a leading cause of poor work performance (Blazej, 2018). There are no distinctive differences of the levels of engagement based on exposure to internal and external corporate social responsibility (CSR) methods. However, there is a higher level of engagement when the associate is only exposed to internal CSR methods versus external CSR methods (Ferreira & Real de Oliveira, 2014). Kumar and Pansari (2015), conducted a study on 75 companies across three continents where they used an associate engagement scorecard and found that with higher levels of associate engagement there was higher profitability for the organization.

When evaluating levels of engagement organizations evaluate levels of engagement between departments, locations, similar organizations, and by industries (Bailey, 2016). When evaluating these aspects of engagement, organizations can also look for trends in low and high engagement levels and ways to correct any deficiencies. Levels of engagement are of interest to HR departments because engagement is a key factor in the retention of quality associates and also provides insight into why they leave (Benn et al., 2015).

Total quality management (TQM) is a driver for creating a competitive advantage, and also a driver for creating customer loyalty through performance management (Prajogo & Sohol, 2006). Performance management can enhance the levels of associate engagement. Part of
performance management is stretch goal setting, this helps to develop personal growth, it also helps to increase the level of engagement that an associate display (Mone et al., 2011)

Spirituality, which Devendhiran and Wesley (2017) defined as one’s spirit displayed at work, is a factor in the amount of engagement displayed. According to Roof (2015), leaders have found that there is a relationship between an individual’s spirit, emotions, and their engagement while at work. When the needs of the associate’s emotional wellbeing are met, they will be more engaged.

**Ethical leadership and engagement.** When the level of ethical leadership is low in an organization associates begin to feel a sense of entitlement, which reduces their levels of engagement. The levels of engagement increase with the perception of ethical leadership (Joplin et al., 2019). According to Ahmad and Gao (2018), ethical leadership relates to associate engagement by looking at trust levels. When the associate feels empowered, it will be displayed in their level of engagement that they display. This will impact morale and attitudes; it can factor into customer satisfaction and the customer shopping experiences.

Ethical leadership not only fosters work engagement through boosting associates’ experience of what is called work meaningfulness, it also “proposes that meaningfulness could moderate and substitute for ethical leadership in influencing work engagement” (Mostafa & El-Motalib, 2020, p. 113). Work meaningfulness is when an associate is able to align their ideas and beliefs with those of the organization to create an inspirational sense of purpose while doing their work (Peng et al., 2016). Ethical leadership and work meaningfulness are directly related and often lead to associate empowerment and work environment satisfaction (Lee et al., 2017).

The relationship between leaders and associates is vital to the success of an organization and the ability to build a foundation of trust is the first step of building this relationship
THE EFFECTS OF ASSOCIATE ENGAGEMENT

(Engelbrecht et al., 2014). When leaders act ethical, and associates feel that they can trust the leaders, they are more likely to be engaged and buy into the organizational ideas.

*Transformational leadership and associate engagement.* The goal of transformational leadership is to inspire others through sharing the vision. It allows associates to see what the goals are and be a part of achieving the vision (Chin et al., 2019). Associates are more engaged when they are inspired, empowered, and motivated. The increased engagement impacts the customer’s shopping experience.

Transformational leaders are essential to be successful in a business environment where being competitive requires innovation, motivation, and the ability to excel (Mufeed, 2018). Transformational leaders engage and empower associates who then create customer loyalty and satisfaction with this engagement. In order for the organization increase their productivity, gain the competitive advantage, and creating sustainability associate engagement is vital (Mufeed, 2018). According to Marwan et al. (2019), the topic of associate engagement remains a focal point for human resource departments across the globe. Organizational success it closely related to levels of engagement and it is the transformational leaders that are instrumental in getting associates to embrace and accept the continual changes that occur.

*Servant leadership and associate engagement.* Servant leadership is having integrity, forming strong, long-term relationships with associates, and putting others’ needs before their own (Yang et al., 2017). Associates that feel valued within the organization that they work for will (a) be happier, (b) have a stronger sense of satisfaction, (c) be more engaged (Blazej, 2018). It is through being a caring leader and servant leadership that this will be accomplished.

Servant leadership is a valuable resource as it assists in shielding associates from some negative aspects that the demands of the job may produce (Bao et al., 2018). Servant leaders lead
their teams with a mindset of putting the needs of others first. A leader who understands the importance of meeting the needs of the team and the organizational goals before their own builds a team of engaged associates. Servant leadership focuses on the wellbeing of others first and it empowers others to be successful in their role. This is vital since servant leaders facilitate the engagement of the associates helping to build customer loyalty through positive experiences (Ye et al., 2019).

**Impacts of associate engagement.** There are many aspects related to the impact that associate engagement has on an organization, and those factors help to shape the sustainability of the organization. One such impact is role associate engagement plays in the competitive advantage that the organization in an increasingly technological savvy and global world. (Kumar & Pansari, 2016).

According to Pandita and Ray (2018), human capital (the associates) is the most important asset in the organization. Consequently, a high level of associate engagement can mitigate turnover within the organization. Turnover is an aspect in an organization that could also impact associate engagement. There is a relationship between associate behaviors, both positive and negative, with the retention of associates (Xiong & Wen, 2020).

Leadership style is another factor that can impact associate engagement, job satisfaction and ultimately the customer shopping experience. Visionary leadership is a type of transformational leadership that allows leaders to accomplish tasks rapidly to meet the organizational objectives (Cheema et al., 2015). As leaders try to engage the associates to improve performance, their style is one of the biggest factors that impact this and when the style clashes with the environment then the levels of engagement are low.
Macleod and Clarke (2010) argued that there are four key drivers to associate engagement which are: (a) Leadership, (b) Engaging managers, (c) Voice, and (d) Integrity. They noted that these drivers have can lead to creating a successful environment of engaged associates. These drivers are key to ensuring the organization is successful, engaging associates from all levels of the organization and creating a culture of trust and respect.

One of the most important factors impacted by associate engagement is customer satisfaction. Associates that are engaged at work provide better customer service, deliver a more positive customer experience leading to increased customer satisfaction in the service industry (Lee et al., 2017). Customer satisfaction is a factor that not only contributes to organizational sustainability, but also impacts organizational performance. The lack of engagement by associates has a direct relationship to customer satisfaction and is a driving force for the customer experience (Chang, 2016). If customers are not satisfied, then most likely their shopping experience will reflect that and be negative.

The final impact to be discussed surrounding associate engagement is the role that social media plays when it comes to levels of engagement. Social media can be used as a form of collaboration and information sharing, allowing associates to share ideas and build important relationships. There is a greater sense of job satisfaction and a higher level of engagement when this occurs (Naim & Lenka, 2017). With organizations moving to the global arena, the power of social media to share information can be a major component of associate engagement.

**Issues with levels of engagement.** When reviewing levels of associate engagement including the deficiencies in engagement in an organization, it is the responsibility of the leaders to identify issues and to develop a plan to correct them. By creating a formal theory on the life cycle of associate engagement in an organization, can review issues with different levels of
engagement and develop a plan on how best to create a higher level of engagement with their associates (Kwon & Park, 2019).

Personal reflection and changing behaviors, which is called unlearning, is another way to correct issues with the level of engagement from associates. Through role clarification and changing negative work practices, organizations can increase the level of engagement exhibited by associates within the organization (Matsuo, 2019). While a personal reflection is not always the best option to change how associates engage, it is one that can be explored by organizational leaders if the company is moving in a different direction that requires their associates to accept change.

Another issue impacting associate engagement is a lack of resources and job burnout. When an associate lacks the resources to perform job duties, or they are overworked, it can lead to a lower level of engagement. Whether it is being exhausted emotionally and frustrated with working conditions, organizational practices or leadership influences associate burnout is a problem that impacts engagement and unless it is addressed with be a contributing factor to an organization’s struggle for success (Kotze, 2018). Another factor contributing to burnout and lower levels of associate engagement are workload and mental demands of job duties placed on associates by supervisors without adequate support to complete the responsibilities to be successful in the role assigned to them (Van Steenbergen et al., 2018).

Core values and associate engagement. Associate engagement impacts organizational sustainability, retention, customer satisfaction, and the core values of the organization. As organizations seek to improve their performance and competitive advantage, they should assess the relationship between the core values and associate engagement (Baltzley, 2016). According to Baker (2014), an organization that is managed well will focus on associate engagement and
ensure that there is an alignment between engagement and core values. When the core values align with associate engagement, there will be a greater sense of accomplishment and value-added feeling.

Frino et al. (2019) argued when an associate clearly understands the organizational goals and values, they are usually willing to put forth greater effort to accomplish them and have a stronger sense of accomplishment overall. When there is a clear understanding of the organizational viewpoint and goals and they align with the associate, there will be a greater sense of belonging and accomplishment leading to higher levels of engagement. Not only does the alignment of organizational core values with levels of associate engagement impact the performance of the organization, it also impacts personal performance as well and is a driver a positive experience (Alagaraja & Schuck, 2015).

According to Berg (2015), “It is believed that symbiotic visions can drive employees and organizations toward a common objective based on the premise that people have a high level of self-motivation and engagement when they are working toward something very personal” (p.1). The more invested an associate is with the vision of the organization, the more engaged they will be, and the dedication to succeeding will be a priority.

**Corporate social responsibility (CSR) and associate engagement.** Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a term that means that an organization takes responsibility for its effect on the environmental and social wellbeing of the communities in which they operate (Mihalache, 2013). Rupp et al. (2018) suggested that when an associate has a positive perspective of the organizational CSR, they are more likely to be engaged and have a positive attitude toward their work environment. The relationship between personal values and CSR is clear. These factors are drivers in associate engagement levels and job satisfaction or feelings of accomplishment.
According to Hur et al. (2019), an associate’s perception of both internal and external CSR plays a role in their level of engagement and will help to develop a stronger sense of belonging. This allows the associate to relate to the organization and help to achieve the goals that have been established in relation to CSR. The more that an associate understands the goals of the organization and exactly what they are trying to accomplish, the bigger asset they will be to the organization and the more engaged they will become. Simple basic understanding of expectations and values is often a determining factor with retention and engagement on all levels within the organization.

Tsourvakas and Yfantidou (2018) conducted a study to link CSR to associate engagement and found that associates like being associated with an organization that is caring. They were proud of being linked to the positive image that was portrayed by the organization. Associates that feel proud of the job they are doing and the contributions that their organizations are making are more likely to be engaged and make an impact on the customer’s experience while in the stores. Opoku-Dakwa et al., (2018) argued that although organizations rely on their associates to achieve CSR initiatives, there has been limited research completed on associate engagement and CSR linkage.

**Positive impact.** Higher levels of associate engagement have a positive impact on customer satisfaction and the customer shopping experience. Associate commitment, loyalty, and performance are increased when associates are engaged. (Kumar & Pansari, 2015).

**Negative impact.** Lower levels of associate engagement negatively impact an organization. Associates that are disengaged or exhibit lower levels of engagement are often not satisfied with their job or are burned out. Highly demanding and stressful jobs can cause
associates to be overworked, emotionally, physically, and mentally tired resulting in lower levels of engagement (Keating & Heslin, 2015).

**Interaction with leaders.** Associate levels of engagement can be impacted by the interactions with leaders. When an associate interacts with a leader of the organization the type of interaction can impact how engaged they become or remain. Leadership influences associate engagement through work conditions, available resources, and emotional and instrumental support provided (Teoh et al., 2016). Leadership has an impact on the overall job satisfaction of an associate. The leader has the ability to foster a successful relationship and increase the chances of a highly engaged associate. The leader also has the ability to foster disengagement if they do not provide the proper support (emotionally and mentally) for the associates (Yang, et al., 2018).

**Stress and associate engagement.** Stress is another factor that can impact associate engagement. When an associate routinely works with the public, there will be different stressors that may impact on how they interact with peers, leaders, and customers. Depending on the situation the associate is dealing with, there is a possibility that their attitude could be affected (Eldor, 2018). One factor that causes stress in an organization is organizational politics. This is when there are behaviors present that contradict the organizational core values and vision (Landells & Albrecht, 2019).

According to McMann et al. (2017), stress and burnout can have a negative impact on the engagement of associates, as there is a direct relationship between the disengagement of associates and being stressed. Burnout comes from prolonged exposure to stress, which turns into associates having lower levels of engagement. When associates are engaged, feel valued, and have a sense of importance it is less likely that they will burnout or become complacent
The effects of associate engagement (Eldor, 2018). Workload, routines, and demands are three different factors that contribute to stress and associate burnout. The relationship between associate engagement, stress, and burnout are important factors to keep in mind in any organization and it should be reviewed often.

Organizational goals impact. The goals of the organization impact the level of engagement that is received from associates, especially if the goals of the organization clash with the goals or values of the individual associate. One of the most important factors that can impact the organizational goals is the engagement of the associates because they are the organization’s most valuable asset and resource (Prameswari, 2019). It is important that the associates align their values and goals with that of the organization. Similarly, the leaders of the organization must ensure that the associates of the organization have an interest in helping the organization be successful and achieve the goals that have been set (Kersari Jena & Pradhan, 2017).

There are many components to associate engagement that impact organizational goals some of those are (a) physical engagement, (b) emotional engagement, and (c) cognitive engagement (Khewsomboon et al., 2017). “Physical engagement is the actual labor expended by employees to get their work done, cognitive engagement is the perception and knowledge of employees in work environments and emotional engagement is comprised of feelings and attitudes of employees toward employers and working conditions” (Khewsomboon et al., 2017, p. 65). These three components are essential to encompass what associate engagement means and being able to impact organizational goals.

Strategies to increase associate engagement. There are different strategies that can be related to increasing associate engagement. Whether it is increasing the level of engagement within an organization for morale boost or it is to help drive customer loyalty through interactions with engaged associates, an engagement strategy needs to be developed and
implemented. One such strategy is Six Sigma. This strategy is used to improve organizational efficiency and performance using as a series of steps that are implemented. Six Sigma can be a driving force in associate engagement because it gets the associate involved in the improvement process (Sunder, 2013). Six Sigma is about continuous process improvement and “Organizations have evolved from the industrial age to the knowledge age, leading to continuous improvement in meeting the customer expectations. Today, one must delight customers and constantly look for new ways to exceed their expectations to retain its market share” (Sunder, 2013, p. 34). If an organization is going to meet the expectations of the customer, it is important to have engaged associates.

Gill (2015) believed that the public relations strategy of storytelling aids in creating increased associate engagement. The thought behind this is that storytelling is a valuable communication tool used internally to engage associates with narratives related to practices, visions, and beliefs of the organizations. There is a direct relationship between storytelling and increased associate engagement, it is believed, reaches an associate emotionally and intellectually on many levels which lead to increased engagement. Using storytelling, the leadership team can provide associates with valuable information and create a sense of involvement. They can share a vision or philosophy and get understanding and buy-in through the storytelling process.

Another approach used to engage associates is to derive a strategy that directly relates to them. This means looking at generational groups to see what drives them and what it takes to keep them engaged. Cattermole (2018) argued that it is important to get to know your associates, find out what is important to them, but also be careful not to make over-generalizations as it
relates to individuals. When tailoring the message to meet the needs of listeners and intended receivers there will be better reception and results.

**Sustainability.** Sustainability refers to the long-term success of an organization through competitive advantage and organizational vision (Ben-Eli, 2018). Sustainability and associate engagement are closely related because both are important to an organization’s efforts to be successful. Engaged associates are central to achieving sustainability. Sustainability along with creating a competitive advantage makes an organization successful. Associate engagement enhances this process (Merriman et al., 2016).

There is a strong relationship between sustainability and associate engagement. According to Polman and Bhattacharya (2016), to create sustainability, an organization needs to have its leaders bridge the gap between the core values of the organization and the personal values of their associates. The leaders of an organization are responsible to not only communicate the goals and the values of the organization, but they must also find out what is important to the associates and incorporate a way to make them feel valued.

**Customer satisfaction.** Customer satisfaction is about meeting the needs of the customer for products and services and the performance of the associates of the organization (Sun & Kim, 2013). Many components of the retail industry are impacted by customer satisfaction and it is essential to be successful. In an environment where service is a part of the organizational structure, it is vital that customer satisfaction is a part of the strategic plan and is a focal point of the organization. According to Lee et al. (2016), customers are assets with diverse with varying needs, buying behaviors, and wants. It is up to the associates to create a successful organization by meeting customer needs and exceeding expectations. Creating a satisfied customer leads to customer loyalty and organizational sustainability. The retail industry is very competitive and
because of globalization meeting, the needs of the customer will be a vital component to creating this environment.

Happy, positive, and upbeat associates lead to higher levels of associate engagement, organizational success, and increased customer satisfaction (Humphrey et al., 2015). In an environment where the associates feel a sense of satisfaction and are happy with their jobs and the organizations, which they work for they will display that and engage at a higher level with customers, going the extra mile to meet their needs. Customer satisfaction is more than just being satisfied with a product or service. According to Casey and Warlin (2001), there are different customers that the organization must satisfy. The first is the customer looking for a product or service that is of good quality at a good price. The second is the customer that looks at the retention levels that an organization has to retain their associates. Both aspects play a role in the customer’s perception, which impacts customer satisfaction.

**Factors that create satisfaction.** When it comes to being able to satisfy the customer there are many components that need to be considered because the customer’s needs or wants are individualized to them specifically. It is the responsibility of the organization to predict, evaluate, understand, and meet those needs every time someone walks into their establishment. It goes beyond just meeting expectations: it is vital in this competitive environment that organizations can exceed those expectations every time.

Customer service is one factor that helps to create customer satisfaction. When an organization has a good handle on customer service and consistently performs the customer service aspect proficiently, they are more likely to help satisfy the customer and create customer loyalty (Kursunluoglu, 2014). Organizations that are leaders in the customer service aspect are also used as examples in the media on how to do customer service exceptionally. A great
example of an organization that offers an exceptional customer service experience is Chick-fil-a. This organization trains all of their associates to end their conversations with customers by saying “my pleasure” (Albrecht et al., 2017).

Brand equity is another factor that a customer uses when determining satisfaction. The customer uses both rational and emotional evaluations to look at brand equity; this will factor in to determine their level of satisfaction with a product or service (Elsaber & Wirtz, 2017). “Consumer based brand equity is defined as the overall utility that the consumer associates to the use and consumption of the brand, including associations expressing both functional and symbolic utilities” (Vazquez et al., 2002, p. 28). When trying to create sustainability, brand equity can be an excellent tool. Both a great marketing tool and a driving force in customer satisfaction, brand equity can be useful in promoting a certain product.

Customer expectation is another factor that can impact customer satisfaction. Every customer has certain expectations they want to be met when walking into a store. The expectations could be availability, quality, style, selection, presentation, or it could be all the above including customer service. Yi and Natarajan (2018) stated that “Most studies acknowledge that customer expectations play a crucial role in the evaluation process of customer satisfaction” (p.387). Customer satisfaction is found in understanding what the customer expects of an organization and being able to meet or exceed those expectations. It is creating a positive impact on the customer’s shopping experience.

**Standard expectations.** Customer satisfaction is about providing the customer with what they want or need at the right time. It encompasses not only the quality of the product or service but the availability and variety of the selection. An important aspect of the customer expectations is the engagement of the associate. The knowledge and willingness of the associates to assist are
valuable to meeting customer expectations. Habel et al. (2016) argued that the reason that there are varying ideas of how to approach customer expectations is that the expectations have a mixed effect on customer satisfaction. Customer expectations can have both a negative and positive impact on customer satisfaction. If an organization cannot fulfill all the needs of the customer and does not meet their expectations, it would be possible to have both a negative and positive experience at the same time.

The standard of expectations for customers will vary from one industry to another as will the products and services are being offered. Service quality can impact the level of satisfaction that a customer has based on the level of service that is delivered. There is a possibility for a negative impact on organizational success and the competitive advantage when a service provider cannot meet the expectations of the customer.

One issue that must be analyzed by the organization is the ability to understand and address the gaps between what the organization and customer perceive as expectations. According to Luk and Layton (2010), there are five gaps that separate the differences in perception from what leaders and customers see as the expectations pertaining to products and services. These five gaps consist of (a) the level of engagement associates give, (b) the overall expectations of the customer versus the perception of overall expectations, (c) quality of products and services as perceived between leaders and customers, (d) communication as perceived by leaders and customer perception, and (e) the customer’s perception of expected services and the service performed (Luk & Layton, 2002). Once these gaps are addressed, it becomes easier for organizations to meet the expectations.

**Perceptions.** Perception is ambiguous; therefore, it can have different descriptions for the same topic. According to de Lange et al. (2018), “Our prior knowledge has a profound impact on
the way we perceive the world” (p.765). Our perceptions can impact how we view experiences when shopping and interacting with others. Those perceptions can impact expectations when it creates bias into the experience, hindering the ability to enjoy or analyze without preconceived thoughts. Customer experiences are affected by preconceptions, they can interfere with the customer forming their own opinion.

According to Moghavvemi et al. (2018), customer perceptions are largely formed from the way they are treated. Proenca et al. (2017) argued that the customer’s and the associate’s perception of the quality of a product or service are directly related, indicating that associates have a good understanding of what customers are looking for in a product or service. By associates being empathetic to what drives customers and being able to understand their perceptions, they are likely to be more engaged when interacting with them.

Organizational success is related to associate empowerment, job satisfaction and customer’s perception of quality (Gazzoli et al., 2010). When associates feel empowered and are satisfied with their job, there is a higher level of engagement. When a customer sees a higher level of engagement, their perceptions of the organization change. These three components are related to and are interactive with each other.

Perception can impact satisfaction is when looking at the product quality. The quality of a product or lack of quality is very interpretative depending on who is evaluating. Perception of quality impacts customer satisfaction and influences a customer’s decision to buy (Biscaia et al., 2017). As retailers turn to eCommerce as a form of creating sustainability traditional retailers must draw in customers. Superior product quality and outstanding customer service is one way to satisfy the customer and create loyalty (Lindberg et al., 2018).
Quality of products/services. Two drivers that impact customer satisfaction in the retail industry are product and service quality (Hallencreutz & Parmler, 2019). The two different aspects of quality are differentiated by what is provided, that is has a different objective to achieve. Product quality speaks to how well the component is put together in the eyes of the customer. Service quality relates to how well the associate interacts and provides service from the customer’s perception (Hallencreutz & Parmler, 2019).

According to Namin (2017), “Providing high quality service to customers is one of the most important challenges every organization faces. No firm can survive unless it can attract and keep a sufficient number of satisfied customers” (p.70). One of the first steps to evaluating the product quality or service is to understand the customer perspective on what they want and how they evaluate their experiences (Song et al., 2016). The quality of a product or service received can impact how a customer perceives an organization.

Products and services are developed with the wants and needs of the customer in mind, making quality an essential part of the development process (Feng-Han et al., 2017). In an effort to satisfy the needs and wants of the customer, product development has shifted away from being led by developers and become customer oriented. One important aspect of creating a quality product is understanding what customers perceive as quality and what specifications created satisfaction in the previous products (Feng-Han et al., 2017). Creating sustainability takes the organization focusing on the quality of products and services and meeting the expectations of the customer. By meeting the expectations, they will maintain a competitive advantage.

Product availability. The availability of products and services is a crucial factor in creating customer satisfaction. Understanding inventory levels, trends, and supply and demand is part of ensuring products are available for customers. There are many factors that contribute to
dissatisfaction with product availability to include (a) out of stock, (b) out of reach (top shelf), (c) no access (locked behind counter or glass), and (d) price mismatch (price different from advertised). Any of these factors can contribute to a customer leaving a store without making their intended purchase, creating a sense of being dissatisfied (Grubor et al., 2017).

When products are out of stock it contributes to the perceptions and satisfaction levels of customers that visit the organization. Availability and affordability have forced many customers to turn to the Internet and online shopping to find the products or services that they want. With online shopping, there are added requirements for satisfying the customer’s expectations and needs. According to Jain et al. (2017), “The customer expects that the right product is shipped with no damage within the promised delivery time window. Since the customer cannot see product availability physically, it is very important that e-tailers ensure the availability of product in their fulfillment center as displayed on the website” (p.353). This does not differ from the expectations in a brick and mortar organization, customer satisfaction is driven by the product availability, being there when it is needed or wanted.

Out of reach products are those products that are placed too high or in an area not accessible by the customer. When the customer needs assistance in getting a product and they are forced to wait for an associate, they can become aggravated. Products that are locked in a cabinet or behind the counter are difficult for a customer to purchase causing dissatisfaction. Customers look to have the products they are looking for readily available without hassle. The final issue related to customer dissatisfaction and product availability is price mismatch. When the price of a product or service differs from that of the advertised price it is often because of miscommunication or misinformation. While advertising increases the purchasing of certain products, it can also drive the demand and increase the price (Hattori & Higashida, 2015).
Customer guarantee. Customer guarantees can include many things such as (a) return policies, (b) product or service reliability, and (c) warranties. When customers shop, they look for quality, affordable price, selection, and reliability. Part of satisfying the customer’s needs is to meet these expectations and stand behind the product or service being offered. With the use of customer guarantees, organizations are able to differentiate themselves from the competitor and work toward creating sustainability.

Return policies are one reason that the customer becomes dissatisfied with an organization. When a business does not stand behind its product or have a clear return policy, it can cause confusion and frustration. “Another, more traditional, piece of the retail toolkit to enhance customer service is the product return policy. The ability to accommodate customer returns of unsatisfactory products represents a key competitive advantage” (Chen & Chen, 2017, p. 155). Being able to meet the needs of the customer helps to create customer loyalty, the customer will have faith that if the product does not meet their expectations, they can bring it back. Customer returns not only impact brick and mortar organizations; they also impact online retailers. Online returns are a huge cost driver for online retailers. However, if they are going to satisfy the customer, they must have a plan in place. Trust is a factor that impacts customer satisfaction, the customer wants assurance that if they are unsatisfied, they can return without hassle (Walsh & Brylla, 2017).

Product or service reliability is usually highlighted by after the sale or service contracts. These contracts signify that the organization is willing to stand behind the product or service that was offered for a specified period. Part of satisfying the customer is the organizational reassurance that the quality of the product or service the customer received is superior. One driver in sustainability is product and service reliability, which amounts to the organization
standing behind their name (Bakshi et al., 2015). Many organizations offer warranties on products to showcase the reliability of the product or service that they offer. Warranties can be differentiated by time frame, the extent of coverage, and cost. The previous factors draw the customer in and create loyalty to brand and product; this drives customer satisfaction (Podolyakina, 2016).

**Core values.** Core values are a part of an organization’s identity and they spell out the company’s vision (Waeraas, 2018). If the values of the organization are not aligned with that of the customer, conflict can arise. Part of customer satisfaction is related to core values and meeting the expectations of the customer from a moral standpoint. Core values can be differentiated by the customer and may be considered a human value. As organizations race to gain competitive advantage and maintain their market share, they use the term value and try to align their product with human values or life goals (Voorn et al., 2018). Closely related to core values is the concept of integrity. When an organization acts with integrity and exhibits core values that the customer can associate with then customer satisfaction is increased. It is about creating trusting relationships, and consistently being able to meet or exceed the expectations of the customer (Bent-Goodley, 2017).

**Interactions with associates.** Positive interactions among associates lead to job satisfaction. Associates are more engaged when they enjoy who they work for and where they work (Wang & Brower, 2018). Organizations that allow for and encourage their associates to interact and communicate among each other build a stronger team of engaged associates. With the higher levels of engagement associates will provide quality customer service and create customer satisfaction.
Ethical leadership. “Ethical leaders are believed to be honest and trustworthy. Perceived as individuals who behave ethically both professionally and personally, ethical leaders are viewed as fair and principled individuals who care about people and society at large” (Schwepker & Ingram, 2016, p. 916). Creating customer satisfaction through ethical leadership is not difficult, the leaders look to do the right thing and make sure they act in with integrity. Ethical leaders help to develop a team of engaged associates that interact with customers honestly and with integrity. By acting ethically and treating both associates and customers fairly, ethical leaders are a part of the success in creating customer satisfaction.

In an effort to create sustainability and maintain a competitive advantage, some organizations are moving toward having an ethical work climate. An environment that fosters ethical behaviors among leaders and associates is considered to be an ethical work climate (Lau et al., 2017). Excellent customer service and customer satisfaction is created through ethical leadership. The ethical climate has five components that help create the environment and they are: “caring (empathy for others), rules (accepted sets of procedures and policies in organizations), law and code (accepted codes of conduct and rules governed by professional bodies and larger societal systems), independence (individual sets of moral and ethical beliefs) and instrumentalism (heavy reliance on personal interests)” (Lau et al., 2017).

Transformational leadership. Customer satisfaction has a strong relationship with transformational leadership. The way that transformational leaders achieve quality customer service and create satisfaction among customers is through (a) initiative, (b) knowledge sharing, (c) ownership, (d) collaboration, and (e) self-development (Jauhari et al., 2017). A large part of being a transformational leader is the ability to adapt, to change quickly and to challenge your associates to do the same. In a global industry such as retail, it is crucial to have the ability to
adapt and change rapidly. Transformational leaders serve as inspirations to the associates they lead and the customer they assist (Chin et al., 2019).

Store managers who exhibit transformational leadership are likely to personally engage in conversations with employees about the nature of customer satisfaction, why it is strategically important, and why and how the firm uses HR practices and an HPWS to systematically support behaviors that facilitate it (Weller et al., 2019, p. 8).

Transformational leadership is similar to ethical leadership in both are related to customer service and the goal of achieving customer satisfaction.

**Servant leadership.** Servant leadership is another style of leadership vital in achieving customer satisfaction. The basis of servant leadership is to put the needs of others first. Servant leadership focuses on developing a team of engaged associates dedicated to helping others. The development of strong customer relationships is essential in satisfying the customer and creating customer loyalty (Wong et al., 2018). Servant leaders emphasize the importance of making the needs of the customer a priority. The servant leader tries to satisfy the needs of the customer and even encourage employees to follow their attitudes and behaviors of serving the customer first.

Servant leadership plays a role in enhancing customer service behaviors and satisfying the customer. Servant leaders take into account individual differences and are able to tailor their customer service skills to meet and satisfy those needs (Yang et al., 2018). With a focus on service, associates play a vital part in addressing the customer’s needs and wants. Leaders serve as motivators to encourage associates to go above and beyond to meet those needs. Through this motivation, associates follow the example of their leader and provide exceptional customer service further driving customer satisfaction.
Customer experience. The customer experience is personal and subjective in nature and the needs and desires of the customer will vary from person to person (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017). When an associate is engaged and has a clear understanding of the customer’s expectations, they are able to create a custom-made plan to meet their needs. The direct relationship between customer experiences and customer satisfaction is shown through both word of mouth communication and continued customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction is also linked to an organization having a team of engaged associates that are focused on customer service (Roozen & Katidis, 2019).

Understanding the customer journey and creating positive customer experiences is important to the success of the organization. The focus on the experience is increased when the customer becomes engaged and interacts with the associate at a higher level (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). The customer experience can be a deciding factor in creating customer loyalty and having the customer return for another visit. The customer experience is a personal one and is driven by individual needs and desires. Understanding this is important for retailers so they can meet those expectations.

Ethical values. A customer’s personal ethical values factors into the satisfaction level and how they view the shopping experience. The customer will likely choose a company that can meet their needs and aligns with their personal values and beliefs. Organizational values and beliefs that are aligned with customer beliefs mean that they have shared beliefs and goals. The customer can be at ease knowing that they are spending their money somewhere that they can trust (Baltzley, 2016).

Customer loyalty. The relationship between customer loyalty and customer satisfaction is crucial when creating sustainability and positive shopping experience. Customer satisfaction is
an indicator to how well an organization is doing when analyzing sustainability. Customer satisfaction is a tool used to gauge how successful an organization is with the products or services that are being offered. Increased customer satisfaction assists in creating customer loyalty (Strenitzerova & Gana, 2018).

Loyal customers create sustainability in several ways such as: (a) they typically spend more money over time, (b) they are a good source of advertising based on personal relationships and recommendations, (c) helping to decrease costs based on positive contributions to the organization, and (d) increase profit margins through decreased price sensitivity due to customer loyalty (Biscaia et al., 2017). From a customer satisfaction perspective, customer loyalty is a great resource in understanding if and organization is successful. When a customer is satisfied, their loyalty remains with the organization. A satisfied customer often shares experiences with others through different avenues such as social media helping to create increased business.

**Social media.** Nunan et al. (2018) argued even though an organization can use social media and other forms of communication to assess how well they are doing by surveying their associates, they are not able to do that with customer satisfaction. The perspective of customer satisfaction is subjective and individualized it cannot be gauge accurately through social media. (Nunan et al., 2018). The social media platform offers organizations more options when promoting a business, however, it also offers a larger audience when a customer wants to share a story. This results in an organization risking negative comments being provided as feedback.

When a customer decides to share a negative experience on a social media platform it can be harmful to an organization’s reputation. According to Ramanathan et al. (2017),

In this digital era, customers make use of the Internet to preview retailers perusing their websites as well as popular third-party sites featuring retailers and their products.
This behaviour represents an entirely different experience to shoppers prior to the Internet age (p.106).

The use of social media and the Internet allows customers to get insight into an organization long before ever stepping foot into the establishment. They can understand what other customers say about their experiences with the organization.

Organizations have turned to the use brand pages to draw customers. When a customer uses the brand page it helps the organization to gain insight into customer desires. Brand pages allow the customer to review the products and services by leaving feedback. In an effort to engage the customer and facilitate strong customer satisfaction drivers, organizations have created pages dedicated to specific brands (Carlson et al., 2018).

**Shopping experience.** Bustamante and Rubio (2017) argued the shopping experience is the environment from a physical aspect, but other aspects are (a) the associates, (b) the policies, and (c) the services. Because the shopping experience is personal in nature and is subjective, the customer’s emotional, physical, social attitude will shape the experience. A negative or positive outcome is often determined by this attitude and shapes future experiences (Bustamante & Rubio, 2017).

The goal of the organization is to create an enhanced shopping experience and ensure that it is memorable, creating a lasting customer relationship. Retailers want to be associated positively when a customer reflects on an experience associated with the organization (Flacandji & Krey, 2020). A single negative shopping experience can cause an organization to lose a long-term customer. Similarly, a shared positive shopping experience can bring additional business and customer loyalty to an organization.
Shopping experiences are not just related to brick and mortar establishments anymore, it also includes online shopping platforms, curbside to go, and ship-to-store formats. Omni-channel shopping experience offers a seamless way for customers to get the things they need without issue (Picot-Coupey et al., 2016). Omni-channel is a great resource for the customer that is looking to compare products and services while searching for the best deals to meet their expectations. This resource not only gives a customer multiple options when shopping it also allows organizations the ability to showcase their products and services on multiple platforms (Yrjölä et al., 2018) When customers have multiple choices for the purchase of products and services, it leads to increased satisfaction, resulting in a positive shopping experience.

**Mobile devices.** A mobile device is a factor that can have an impact on the shopping experience. Customers are dependent upon their mobile devices to look up reviews, ratings, and specifics of a product or service instead of speaking to an associate (Rippe et al., 2017). Mobile devices are a way for the organization to communicate sales, coupons, promotions, and other incentives that are beneficial to the customer. The customer can also use a mobile device to not only locate the store but in some cases locate the product within the store enhancing the overall shopping experience (Li et al., 2017).

Another use of a mobile device to enhance the shopping experience is associate engagement. Some organizations have the technical ability to interact with customers as they are shopping in real-time. The organization can use the store app that is downloaded to a mobile device to answer questions, give guidance, and facilitate check out without ever having the face-to-face interaction (Faulds et al., 2018). Because customers look to use their mobile devices interactively during the shopping experience, retailers have had to increase technological abilities
to match them and meet that ability. The overarching goal is to create a positive shopping experience by satisfying the customer.

Mobile devices are quickly replacing traditional shopping methods and becoming a preferred method to shop. The ability to get and give instant feedback with the use of a mobile device intensifies the satisfaction of shopping with a mobile device. Through this process the user has a better control of the information they find when purchasing or reviewing a product or service. This method allows for the customer to provide instantaneous feedback, both positive and negative (San-Martin et al., 2016).

Associate engagement. Associate engagement is a major concern when it relates to the shopping experience. The associates must make an impact on the customer from the time they enter the store until they make their purchase and leave. Strong characteristics of engaged associate are being upbeat and having a positive attitude. The associate’s positive attitude translates into improved customer service and “Consequently, they prove to be more resourceful for customers to understand their emotions, requirements and expectations during the service interaction” (Siddiqi, 2015, p. 281).

Customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is essential to create customer loyalty, which results in the organization being able to create sustainability. Missing aspects of customer satisfaction can have a direct impact on the organization and the shopping experience (Roy et al., 2017). The relationship between customer satisfaction and the shopping experience is vital. In an effort to create sustainability and customer loyalty the shopping experience must be both satisfying and engaging.

The goal of satisfying the customer is to create an experience that has a positive outcome. Retailers want to make customers feel “at home” during their shopping experience creating a
relaxing and familiar environment. By creating a familiar environment there becomes a sense of comfort and security. According to Ainsworth and Foster (2017), “Feeling at ease and being able to shop in a worry-free setting should enable consumers to act more freely, thus achieving shopping goals effectively with minimal disruption” (p.30). The more comfortable the customer is the more likely they are to spend time and money.

It is important to understand that exceeding customer expectations is a driving force to satisfying the customer. When a customer has extensive experience with a product or service their expectations will differ from that of someone that does not. The differentiating expectations can cause a variance in the levels of satisfaction. It is the organization’s responsibility to understand and address these differences (Ofir & Simonson, 2007).

**Positive outcome.** Positive outcomes in a shopping experience can impact whether a customer returns for another visit. A positive shopping experience can also impact word of mouth perceptions of organizational quality. As retailers try to set themselves apart and showcase their strengths, the shopping experience will be a key indicator of how successful they have become at reaching their goal (Cachero-Martinez & Vazquez-Casielles, 2017).

Creating a positive shopping experience requires an understanding of customer shopping behaviors. By understanding the expectations of the customer and meeting them, the organization has the ability to create a positive shopping experience (Park & Powers, 2013). When organizations are aligned with customer wants and needs it is a win-win situation for all parties involved.

**Negative outcome.** A negative outcome related to a shopping experience is detrimental to an organization and can cause customers to seek other alternatives to obtain products and services that are needed. Similarly, a positive shopping experience and be helpful in creating
sustainability. A negative experience can threaten customer loyalty and a positive will aid in sustainability. If a customer has a negative experience, they are ten times more likely to post information regarding that experience to social media sites which may include posting to the organization’s website. Customers will seek out the organization’s website for the purpose of leaving a negative review about a specific product, service, or the overall organizational performance for others to read (Pantano & Gandini, 2018).

**Shared information.** Information sharing is a fast, convenient way for a customer to provide feedback regarding a shopping experience. It is a great avenue for letting others know about the quality of a product or service and it can be used to express concerns about a specific experience. Retailers use information sharing platforms such as email, webpages, and mailers to inform customers about special events or sales. Many customers use web-based platforms to learn about products and services from other customers. These platforms are also a great tool for retailers to understand what they are doing well and where they need to improve (Lee et al., 2006). Retailers that successfully gather customer information can also use this platform for marketing and convenient return policy.

Blogs are another great way for customers and retailers to share information. Blogs can be used to increase knowledge, share ideas, and get information on how to do something. Blogs often serve as tutorials for product and service; provide reviews and feedback guidance from different levels of expertise (Lu & Lee, 2011). Blogs can help create positive or negative feelings around a product based on information published. “As blogs have become an important information communication medium, selecting blog types that are appropriate and effective for the products they are to promote is now an important issue in corporate advertising” (Ho et al., 2015, p. 347).
Organizations that operate their business online use digital information sharing as a means of broadcasting information about products and services to the online community. Growing in popularity and becoming more competitive, the online community uses information sharing as a way to attract their market share of the online customer base. (Constantiou et al., 2016). From customer complaints to customer reviews, there is information available about everything one could want to know. Organizations such as Apple, Google, and Amazon use these types of platforms to compete in the customer satisfaction arena. The organizations gain competitive advantage and create a higher level of engagement when they are successful (Constantiou et al., 2016).

**Impact on loyalty.** According to Bustos-Reyes and González-Benito (2008), “loyalty refers to consumer behavior guided by a brand, product, or particular store over time, operationalized as the observed patterns of purchase repetition or relative volume of purchase of the same brands or in the same stores” (p. 1016) There is a belief that a relationship exists between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty where positive interactions create satisfaction resulting in customer loyalty (Francioni et al., 2018).

Depending on the circumstances, the shopping experience can either have a negative or positive effect on customer loyalty. Customer loyalty is related to customer satisfaction and both have an impact the shopping experience. Customer experiences can be differentiated according to the experience (positive or negative) and associate engagement plays a role in how satisfying the experience is for the customer. That outcome will ultimately determine customer loyalty (Roozen & Katidis, 2019).

**Social media.** According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016),
Customers now interact with firms through myriad touch points in multiple channels and media, and customer experiences are more social in nature. These changes require firms to integrate multiple business functions, and even external partners, in creating and delivering positive customer experiences (p.69).

Social media is a resourceful tool and often used when researching an organization. When evaluating the stability and reliability of an organization, customers look at reviews, feedback, and other customer interactions. According to Thakur (2016), customer interactions with companies are shifting from traditional one-way mass media like print, radio, and television to interactive online, social, and mobile platforms.

Social media has become a platform to share information about products, services, and shopping experiences. In this digital age, social media has become an outlet to provide feedback instantaneously regarding a customer experience. Customers are willing to share information that is pertinent to their experience to include (a) associate interaction and engagement, (b) product or service quality, and (c) expectation failures or successes (Pantano & Gandini, 2018). The information-sharing platform can be a driver for repeat business opportunities as well as helping to create new customer base and recoup lost sales.

When customers feel that they have not received the attention they deserve, their service expectations were not met, or they were not assisted at all they will use social media platforms to spread the word and let the world know about their dissatisfaction and how negative the experience was for them. On the upside, organizations can use the social media platform to gather useful information into the opportunities that exist, according to the customer, and look for ways to correct them (Pantano & Gandini, 2018). The power of social media has the ability to
destroy an organization based on a single shopping experience. The company, however, can use the information to turn a negative into a positive situation.

When looking for reviews about products and services, social media is a great resource. Customers love to share their experiences on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and even the organization’s dedicated website. Customers are not afraid to share their displeasure regarding a product or service failure (Balaji et al., 2016). Online platforms are a fast way to tell the most people about an unpleasant experience and even more so when the issue has not been corrected. Retailers can use the platform to understand what customers are saying about the organization and this will assist them in getting stronger and repairing issues and focusing on what they do well.

When a customer shares being disappointed that expectations were not being met on a social media platform it can be harmful to the organization. Similarly, when a customer shares that their expectations were exceeded, it can be beneficial. It is common for people to share when expectations are not met, stating what went wrong from their perspective. Customers often lash out and want to share what they felt they were supposed to get versus what they received. The problem is that perspectives are subjective and not all expectations are the same. Sharing these experiences can do more harm than good when it comes to publicity for the organization. However, social media is an open format and is used for this purpose (Balaji et al., 2016). Social media also plays a vital role in the success of an organization when they are viewed as doing the right thing. By providing exceptional customer service and a positive shopping experience they achieve customer loyalty.

Summary of literature review. The summary of the literature review suggests that there is a direct relationship between associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping
experience. The level of associate engagement will impact the level of customer satisfaction resulting in a negative or positive impact on the shopping experience. Additionally, there are various drivers that can impact the factors that affect levels of engagement, including leadership style, job satisfaction and core values. The literature review provided the knowledge of additional factors that influence associate engagement levels, customer satisfaction drivers, and shopping experience from multiple perspectives. Scholarly data related to the three components was reviewed and analyzed. The literature review provided essential information that informed the research.

The use of the case study method was found to be an appropriate qualitative design method for this study on how low levels of associate engagement leads to the customer being dissatisfied with the shopping experience. Qualitative research using the case study methodology is generally accepted as an ideal method for researching a subjective issue using life experiences or events as the platform. Case study literature from previous case studies was explored and relevant information about issues related to each of the components was reviewed extensively. The case study methodology allowed for a review of a single organization’s opportunities related to this issue.

**Transition and Summary of Section 1**

Section 1 includes the background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, definition of terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, significance of the study, and a review of the professional and academic literature. A background to the problem of how the low level of engagement from associates that resulted in customers being dissatisfied with their shopping experience was revealed. Various factors were explored to see how they related to the associate engagement and
its impact. Furthermore, this study was designed to fill the gaps in the literature regarding lower levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience. The results of this study can aid understanding the impact of engagement level on customer satisfaction in the retail environment. The literature that the researcher reviewed provided additional insight into the factors that contribute to low levels of engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience.

In Section 2, the project, purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, study method and design, population and sampling, data collection, data analysis, and reliability and validity is discussed. In this section knowledge that was gained from this qualitative study led to a better understanding of how low levels of engagement and customer satisfaction impact the shopping experience. This knowledge also helped to facilitate the recommendations to address additional issues with lower levels of engagement from a customer service perspective for Walmart. By using what was learned in the literature review the researcher was able to expand on the literature that is available and provide a recommendation for future study.
Section 2: The Project

This study explored the relationship between associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience. This section explains the research that was conducted, defines the role of the researcher, provides a summary of the participants included in the study, and explains the research method and design being utilized for the study. Furthermore, this section defined the population and sampling, defined data collection procedures and data analysis methods that were utilized in this study and discussed the reliability and validity of the methodology selected.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to add to the literature by exploring the different levels of associate engagement with customers and the way engagement impacts a customer’s perspective on their shopping experience. While investigating the levels of associate engagement has gained popularity in recent years, there is still no definitive measure used to determine what is the appropriate level of engagement (Shuck et al., 2017).

This study incorporated the concepts of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty. The customers of Walmart were asked to share their experiences while shopping in the retail establishment. Interview questions were open-ended to allow customers and associates to share their experiences. This conceptual framework of the case study research model allowed customers and associates to share real-life experiences.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in a qualitative case study was to collect the data and analyze the information. The researcher (a) reported the voices of the participants, (b) focused on a specific group of participants, and (c) developed an understanding of the problem (Creswell,
2016). This researcher used the online platform of Qualtrics to collect survey information from a selected sampling of Walmart associates and customers. This researcher also conducted one-on-one interviews with Walmart customers and associates. Survey and interview questions were developed around answering the question of how low levels of associate engagement affect customer satisfaction and impact the customer shopping experience. When the requested number of surveys had been obtained, the researcher closed the survey site and one-on-one interviews were concluded once the researcher completed 30 interviews. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the data compiled and used it to create recommendations for future studies.

Participants

Case study research generally falls under qualitative studies, that is, it focuses on real-life scenarios that are based on a group or single individual (Azure et al., 2109). The participants for this study were comprised of Walmart customers and Walmart associates. There were no limiting demographics, and it was open to all Walmart customers for both the interviews and the surveys. The surveys and interviews were also open to associates in any role at Walmart and were not position or role-specific. The researcher used social media and email to contact potential participants once the survey was opened for participation. There was an equal number of associate and customer participants and each group had a specific set of questions that were answered. Only surveys that were filled out completely were used to analyze and the findings were reported. The participants remained anonymous, to ensure that information was collected ethically, and the study participants were not required to provide any personal information other than basic demographics, including (a) age (figures 2 and 3) and (b) sex (figures 4 and 5). No other information was collected from the participants of the surveys or the interviews.
Figure 2
Age of Customers

Figure 3
Age of Associates
**Figure 4**

Gender of Customers

![Gender for Customers Q20](image)

**Figure 5**

Gender of Associates

![Gender for Associate Q20](image)
Research Method and Design

In order to analyze how levels of engagement impact customer satisfaction and affect the customer shopping experience, a qualitative method was used for this research study. Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative research studies are used to analyze life experiences and help understand them from an interpretive perspective. For this researcher to be able to answer the research questions and support the problem statement, the use of a qualitative study was selected. This assisted in gaining insight into an issue with no conclusive answers. According to Boblin et al.; (2013), the use of the case study approach can enhance an understanding of a phenomenon through the use of documents, interviews, and individual observations.

The research method and design that was selected for this study was a qualitative case study. Qualitative case study was selected to explore the impact of lower levels of associate engagement on customer satisfaction that affects the shopping experience. The reason that the qualitative research method was selected was to be able to analyze the shopping experiences of Walmart customers. The case study research design was selected to study the experiences of both Walmart associates and customers. The cases that were studied explored the customers’ perceptions of their shopping experience based on customer satisfaction related to the levels of associate engagement. There were also cases that studied the perception of Walmart associates related to levels of engagement, customer satisfaction, and the effect of both on the customer shopping experience.

Discussion of method. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2016), the purpose of the qualitative research method is to gain an understanding into situations that may not be simple to understand, which may be open in nature, and may contribute to the defining of a theory. Participants were encouraged to share their experiences, contribute to understanding the
phenomenon being studied and being a part of future solutions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of this qualitative research was to look at the perception of the individuals and to analyze and interpret the researcher’s observations (Stake, 2010).

According to Roberts (2014), “Qualitative researchers deal with “subjective” issues while “objectivity” is arrived at through quantitative methods” (p.2). Clark and Sousa (2015) contend, “Developments in knowledge translation and social media provide new possibilities for qualitative research to change the world” (p.1). The qualitative method was selected for this research study as the questions to be answered explored how the research participants perceive shopping experiences based on the level of associate engagement that is received and the overall customer satisfaction. Various data was collected from surveys and interviews of Walmart customers and associates while exploring the perception of the shopping experience to find common issues as perceived by the research participants.

Discussion of design. The goal of this researcher was to gain insight into the perceptions of both the Walmart customers and Walmart associates regarding the impact that lower levels of engagement have on customer satisfaction, resulting in an impact on the shopping experience. In order to achieve the desired information, the case study research design was selected as the appropriate design. Because a qualitative case study allows the researcher the opportunity to gather, analyze, and process information provided by participants during the study (Creswell, 2014) the researcher believes that this was the appropriate design. This case study was seeking to gain an understanding into how lower levels of associate engagement impact customer satisfaction, which influences the shopping experience. The goal was to understand the perceptions of Walmart customers and Walmart associates, and this knowledge was gained during the case study surveys and interviewing process.
Case study research design has the characteristics desired to achieve the necessary results and allows this researcher to collect data from multiple participant’s perspectives. A case study was the selected research design to be able to evaluate real-life scenarios and issues (Creswell, 2014). Case study research design allowed for untainted perceptions and behaviors to be analyzed. The research design of case study was selected so the researcher could study the experiences and perceptions of Walmart customers and Walmart associates using a series of research questions for each group of participants.

The participants of the case study consisted of 125 Walmart customers and 125 Walmart associates. Both surveys and interviews were the methods used during the case study, and only data that was completed in its entirety was used for this study. The interview questions were designed to address the research questions, interviews with Walmart associates, and customers who agreed to participate were scheduled for interviews. Information gathered during the interviews will be stored with the survey information received. In order to keep anonymity, interview participants were assigned a code instead of using their name for confidentiality purposes. Interview results were also coded to analyze similar and unique experiences between the qualitative research case study participants.

**Summary of method and design.** The qualitative research method was selected for this study so that the experiences of Walmart customers could be explored based on the level of associate engagement and customer satisfaction that was achieved. Case study research design was selected within the qualitative research method in order to study the experiences of multiple Walmart customers from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The case study research design was selected to explore the customers’ perceptions of the shopping experience and to understand
similar perspectives and experiences within different customer groups. This research study was qualitative in nature and utilized the case study research design.

**Population and Sampling**

The pool of potential participants for the qualitative research case study included Walmart customers and Walmart associates. There were no limiting demographics. The sample was taken from Walmart customers and Walmart associates that participated in the qualitative research case study. In order to be selected, the Walmart customer or Walmart associate must have completed the survey in its entirety or answered all interview questions to be eligible for this study. The study sample population was large enough to reach data saturation and large enough to be a representation of the entire Walmart customer and Walmart associate base. This researcher used a population sample size of 30 interviews to achieve a saturation point and 250 surveys for the purpose of triangulation. Weller et al. (2018) claimed for larger domain sizes, you a larger sample size is needed to reach saturation; however, a good range is between 20-99 interviews. There was no set number that determines saturation point it was only when there is no new emerging data or no new themes that saturation was reached (Fusch & Ness, 2015). According to Creswell (2014), there is no set number of participants that has been determined that when reached would provide accurate data and results in a qualitative research.

**Discussion of population.** The only population requirement for this study was that the participant was a current Walmart customer or a current Walmart associate. Individuals that currently shop at or work for Walmart were eligible to participate in this study and were included in the target research population for both the surveys and interviews. This researcher found that this population was appropriate because the focus was on the shopping experience of Walmart customers and the perceptions of Walmart associates. Ethnicity, socio-economic background,
gender, race, and age were not a factor for consideration of inclusion in the target population. These factors were not utilized as consideration for participation because the focus of this study was to understand the shopping experience, based on the levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction. All Walmart customers and Walmart employees, without regard to their demographics, were considered to be eligible for participation in this study.

Discussion of sampling. The sample size of the population was an accurate reflection of both Walmart customers and Walmart associates, representing a variety of different participants from several locations. Creswell and Poth (2018), suggest that the sample be selected from multiple locations, using participants that have the ability to provide extensive information and insight into the research study. The sampling was a purposeful sampling, and the researcher selected this method of sampling because it is suggested for case studies. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that there are many possibilities when it relates to purposeful sampling and case study. The sample size was 250 participants for the surveys, 30 participants for the interviews, it focused on the shopping experiences of customers and employee’s perception of the shopping experiences based on levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction. For this qualitative case study, the survey saturation point was reached when 125 associates and 125 customer surveys were completed in entirety. Through interview questions, the saturation point was reached once 30 interviews had been conducted with all questions answered thoroughly. According to Creswell (1998) being able to develop a model fully or saturate in a case study may involve completing from 20 to 30 interviews.

Summary of population and sampling. The population for this qualitative research case study was exclusive to Walmart customers and any Walmart associates. This case study used a sampling of study participants from the pool of all survey participants. Only participants that
completed answered all interview questions, or the survey in its entirety, were used in the research study. Once the total number of desired participants was reached, the researcher stopped conducting the interviews and ended the survey. This research study was open to all Walmart customers and Walmart associates regardless of socioeconomic background. The sample size for the qualitative research case study was limited to 30 interviews; 125 Walmart customers and 125 Walmart associates participated. Data saturation was reached when 30 interviews were conducted enabling the researcher to answer the research questions. The 250 surveys were completed for the purpose of triangulation.

**Data Collection**

Personal interviews were the preferred methods of primary data collection within this qualitative case study research because they lead to aiding in the understanding of the phenomenon and the event that was researched (Yin, 2014). The surveys were used for the purpose of triangulation. Interview questions are usually the secondary questions within a research study, written using an approach that interviewees can easily understand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Personal interviews are used in qualitative research for many purposes such as gathering information from multiple sources and gaining insight from the personal interviewees’ perspective (Stake 2010). Case studies seek to understand events from the perspectives of individuals that have had experiences with the topic that is being researched. Data collection within qualitative case study research was collected when individuals were able to share their life experiences and describe the phenomenon that was being researched in the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

The primary instruments of data collection for this qualitative research case study were this researcher, and the interview guide. The interview questions and the survey questions were
designed to answer the research questions that are in Section 1 of this qualitative case study. The relationships between the research, the interview questions, and the survey were explained. Data collection instruments, collection techniques, and data organization techniques were described in detail. Interviews and surveys for this study were conducted using open-ended, structured questions to start. During an interview if a response from a participant to a question required follow-up, a more detailed question was asked that built upon the initial response given by the interviewee to the initial question that was being asked. The list of initial questions that were asked of each interviewee are available in Appendix D and E.

**Instruments.** The primary instruments of data collection for this qualitative research case study were this researcher and the interview guide. The survey guide was used as well for the purpose of triangulation. According to Stake (2010), qualitative research focuses on experiential data, which can be acquired through the use of personal interviews, researcher observations, and other records. For this study, the researcher used a qualitative method, which required the use of personal interviews of Walmart customers and associates as well as online surveys. The interview and survey guides listed the questions being asked of participants and provided detailed instructions on what was required from each participant regarding a proper and complete response.

**Data collection techniques.** This researcher interviewed 30 participants that met the requirements of the study. This researcher also obtained 250 surveys for this study. Participant interviews took place off Walmart property, in a public location that was predetermined and mutually agreed upon. The interviews were confidential and only research question results were shared with no identifiable information. The interviews were completely voluntary and confidential. The requirements to participate in either the survey or the interviews were that they
were either a Walmart customer or a Walmart associate, and they answer questions completely and in entirety. Interview duration ranged from 20 to 40 minutes and surveys only took between 10 to 15 minutes to fill out.

Data organization techniques. When an interview or a survey was completed, it was recorded digitally, transcribed, and each transcription was entered into NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software package, located on the researchers’ laptop. NVivo is a qualitative analysis program that has the ability to process large amounts of data while creating themes and coding the research results. All surveys and interviews that were collected from this study were logged into the software. There were no demographic identifiers other than they were a Walmart customer or associate, if they were male or female, and age range. During the interview, the researcher made note of questions that required follow up and the researcher made note of emerging themes in the survey answers. This researcher did request permission to record interviews for later review and sought permission from participants that take the survey to contact them for additional questions. All data that was obtained in this study was saved electronically and inputted into the NVivo software. Hand-written notes and material that were printed are stored in a locked file drawer in this researcher’s home office. All electronic information as well as printed and hand-written information will be stored for a period of three years following the approval of the dissertation. After that time, all electronic data files will be deleted. This researcher will shred hand-written and printed information three years following the approval of the dissertation.

Summary of data collection. Data was collected through interviews and surveys; participants were Walmart customers and associates. Each interview was taped, recorded in the NVivo software, and then analyzed for a theme. This researcher kept record of the surveys as
well and entered them into the NVivo software program with the interviews. Confidentiality will continue to be maintained by only revealing whether it was a customer or associate who answered the questions or filled out the survey. The software stored the files and sorted them by theme. All the records will continue to be maintained on this researchers’ laptop.

**Data Analysis**

The data that was collected from the interviews and surveys for this study was analyzed by the researcher and addressed all research questions while providing an understanding of how associate engagement and customer satisfaction leaders impact the customer shopping experience. This project used the qualitative case study design and implemented data collection methods that were supportive to the selected design. This researcher utilized the Qualtrics survey site to gather the surveys for this project. The link to the survey was mailed out via email and was provided in the social media sites of Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn to gather participants for this study. Once the surveys had been completed on the survey site, this researcher reviewed them to ensure that all surveys selected had been completed entirely. This researcher used digital surveys only and did not have participants complete any paper form of the surveys. Once the surveys were completed, they were coded using the NVivo software.

This researcher analyzed data in a manner that was consistent with case study data analysis recommendations found within the literature reviewed. According to Yin (2017), case study designs are used by researchers to facilitate an understanding into the experience. Once the interviews and surveys were completed, they were transcribed, reviewed by the participants for accuracy, and corrections were made, then this researcher utilized the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to analyze the data that had been collected. The NVivo software package is designed to allow data to be coded for sorting by theme. For this study, the researcher used the
NVivo software to assist in reviewing the completed interview and survey responses from the participants. Through the use of the coding features available in the NVivo software, this researcher was able to code the findings of the study by theme. Coding is a key characteristic of qualitative research analysis, it allowed for the sorting of the data by theme, and issues that were relevant to the study. The coding process was used by this researcher to aid in the discovery of patterns in the data that was collected from the participants (Stake, 2010).

**Summary of data analysis.** This researcher performed data analysis in this qualitative case study research. The data analysis technique used was coding to look for themes that emerged from the collected data. Computer coding was completed through the use of the NVivo software package. Both the interviews and surveys were analyzed and then inputted to find common themes. This researcher began by reviewing interview and surveys, listening to the recorded interviews, and reviewing any notes that were taken during interviews. Participants were then asked to review their interviews for accuracy, and if necessary, they were asked to provide additional information or clarification to certain responses. After both the researcher’s review and the participants’ reviews, descriptive statements that assisted in understanding the customer experience were identified and utilized during the creation of themes. The surveys were also analyzed and inputted into the NVivo software to look for themes as well.

**Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity not only consider the repeatability of a study’s findings from one study to another, but they are also vital parts of a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Both are important to establishing the credibility of a study as well as the extent that the study results can be relied upon to produce consistency for another research study. The researcher was cognizant about bias, which can play a role in influencing the results and therefore, must use the
validation of the findings to support the results (Stake, 2010). Reliability refers to the stability of the responses that are coded (Creswell, 2014). Validity, which is a form of triangulation, is used when researchers use of multiple sources, methods, and theories to substantiate their findings (Creswell, 2014). This researcher used customers and associates of Walmart for both the one-on-one interviews and for the online surveys.

According to Yin (2014), triangulation in a qualitative case study research refers to combining of data from different sources to support a single idea within those sources. Multiple sources of data may include one-on-one interviews, personal observations, and online surveys (Yin, 2014). For this qualitative case study regarding associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the customer shopping experience, triangulation of study data included combining interview and survey data sources as well as the researcher’s personal observations. Observations made by the researcher during the case study interviews were discussed with the individual participants and recorded if participant and researcher deemed relevant. Any handwritten data or notations related to the interviews were stored with all other data.

Saturation in qualitative case study research does not require a large number of participants because it is about life experiences and Mason (2010) stated case study most often utilizes interviews as their method of obtaining saturation. This researcher believes that saturation of both associates and customers was important to the study. It helped get an accurate perspective into how associate engagement and customer satisfaction impact the customer’s shopping experience. According to Saunders et al. (2018), in qualitative research, saturation is used as the criterion that determines when data collection is complete and no new information would be learned by continuing to collect data. In this study, this researcher achieved saturation
after 30 interviews were completed and the 250 surveys were completed for the purpose of triangulation.

**Reliability.** According to Yin (2014), reliability is demonstrating that the data and procedures in a study can be repeated and yield the same results each time. Case study is optimal when proving reliability and is vital that a future researcher will be able to produce the same results which will limit the possibility for bias or errors in a research study (Yin, 2014). Reliability in qualitative research is addressed by using field notes, recording of interviews, proper transcription of files and research documents, and proper coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this study, the researcher collected data through one-on-one interviews and surveys. In the interview, reliability was achieved through the use of a questionnaire that was answered by the participant. The sample of participants was random, based on the qualification that they worked or shopped at Walmart. Each interview question was open-ended and was read verbatim to the participants to avoid a variance in responses. All interviews were recorded, and after each interview had been completed, the researcher transcribed the recorded responses, and then provided to the participant in written form for review. The participants then had an opportunity to review their responses and make corrections if necessary, before the responses were coded. The surveys were online, available, and open to all individuals that either worked or shopped at Walmart. The questions were open-ended and allow the participants to share their experiences.

**Validity.** Yin (2014) stated validation in qualitative research has many different perspectives and researchers can explore multiple during their research studies. There are also many different validation strategies such as the researcher’s lens, the participant’s lens, and the reader’s, or reviewer’s lens. Each one of these strategies offers a different perspective and can aid in validating the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to provide increased validity to a
study a researcher should use at least two of the three strategies. Researcher’s lens refers to corroboration of evidence, discovery of negative case analysis, and clarifying researcher bias, Participant’s lens refer to member checking or participant feedback, the collaboration of participants, the persistent observation in the field, and the reader’s or reviewer’s lens refers to external audits, peer review, and generating descriptive responses (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Summary of reliability and validity.** Procedures were used in this qualitative research case study to increase the reliability and validity of the study. Reliability was used to ensure the consistent collection and analysis of the study data. Validation strategies were geared toward assessing validity through the researcher’s lens and the lens of the participant. These procedures included member and data checking, seeking clarification where necessary, and mitigating researcher bias. Both reliability and validity were essential to establishing credibility in this research study so that future studies could replicate the findings.

**Transition and Summary of Section 2**

Section 2 outlines the specifics of the qualitative research case study on how levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction impact the customer’s shopping experience. It included the details on the way that the qualitative research study was conducted. The role of the researcher, survey guide, and interview guide were determined to be the primary instruments of data collection for this research study. In addition, participant selection, data analysis, and the reliability and validity of the collected data were specifically described in this section.

Section 3 contains the findings of the research study, any applications to practice, and the different recommendations for actions to be taken. The recommendations for further study and research will be placed in the conclusion of Section 3. In this section, the researcher will share the life experience of the participants that are a part of the research study to include the biblical
integrations. The researcher will share the participants ideas and thoughts about associates’ level of engagement and customer satisfaction impact the customer shopping experience.
Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The goal of this qualitative case study research was to gain an understanding into the level of associate engagement required to create customer satisfaction and a positive shopping experience. By analyzing the collection of data from the participants’ experiences and perceptions through anonymous surveys and one-on-one interviews, this researcher was able to document the findings of this qualitative case study research involving the retail establishment Walmart. This researcher was able to identify the themes that emerged from the participants, the researchers’ findings will add to the research knowledge on the levels of associate engagement necessary to create a positive shopping experience and increase revenue for the retail establishment. The purpose of Section 3 is to present the case study results from a thorough analysis of the data collected and analyzed through Qualtrics and NVivo 12. Section 3 begins with a brief overview them moves to the presentation of the findings, followed by the applications to professional practice, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, reflections, and the summary and study conclusions.

Overview of Study

The qualitative case study conducted by the researcher intends to contribute to existing literature and research regarding associate engagement, customer satisfaction, customer shopping experience, and increased revenue, specifically what levels of associate engagement are necessary to create customer satisfaction which will determine the customer’s shopping experience and impact profitability and sustainability of Walmart. One-on-one interviews conducted, and anonymous surveys also were structured to answer the research questions presented in Section One. The questions created the ability that led to identifying common themes surrounding associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience. A
total of 280 individuals participated in the study between interviews and surveys. 50% were associates and the other 50% were customers of Walmart. All participants were over the age of 18, there was not a specific gender requirement, and the associates could be employed for any length of time in any position within the organization. Each group of participants was asked the same questions presented in the interview guide and the anonymous survey. There was one set of questions for associates and one set of questions for customers. The interviews were structured allowing however, follow-up questions were asked when there was a need to elaborate on responses, when appropriate, from the respondent. Participants were recruited through social media and word of mouth on strictly voluntary basis. No data that was collected would be used to identify participants.

Data was analyzed using NVivo 12 resulting in six primary themes and additional sub-themes. The six themes aligned with the research questions presented in Section One. Each theme further contributes to the professional field of study with an emphasis on levels of engagement, customer satisfaction, and the customer shopping experience.

The sources of data for this qualitative case study were one-on-one interviews and anonymous surveys. According to Creswell and Powell (2018), saturation is reached with 20-30 interviews; in addition, anonymous surveys were used for the purpose of triangulation. The one-on-one interviews of the 30 participants were conducted utilizing the interview guide found in Appendix A and 240 survey participants using two surveys, 1 distinctive to customers and 1 distinctive for associates. The participants of the survey self-reported data through Qualtrics (online survey). The participants that interviewed sat in one-on-one interviews that were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. They then were given the opportunity to review the
transcripts and make any adjustments that they felt needed to be made further ensuring accuracy of the information.

**Presentation of Findings**

The presentation of findings for this qualitative case study is comprised of an analysis and interpretation of data obtained through one-on-one interviews and surveys that were pertinent to an extensive review of current literature and the stated research questions. The survey data was uploaded from Qualtrics to the NVivo coding software. Then, this researcher used data screening to filter out surveys with missing information or invalid information to remove them from the analysis process. The data collected from the interview process was applied to specific categories and assigned codes and the same process was used for the surveys. This process provided validity and reliability of the data within this case study. This researcher used the NVivo coding software to analyze the data from both the surveys and the interview transcripts. The use of this program provided a visual demonstration of the data obtained from the interviews transcripts and surveys after it was coded. This program also developed a diagram which allowed the researcher to identify coding relationships and thematic categories found from a triangulation of data obtained from the interview process, anonymous surveys, and the review of literature. Two different sets of themes were created however, there were six that were most common to both sets of data that was coded. Word Clouds were created for both the surveys and the interviews to show the coded themes. The Word Clouds depicts the common themes that were found from associates and customers in both the surveys and the interviews. Most of the same themes can be found in each Word Cloud and was common among associates and customers (see Figures 5 and 6). Both survey participants and interview participants commented
on levels of engagement, customer satisfaction, the shopping experience and the impact on customers.

**Figure 6**

Themes Associated with Survey

**Figure 7**

Themes Associated with Interviews
The survey data collection ran from January 18th to January 28th, 2021, yielding 527 associate responses and 129 customer responses. Of the 527 responses, the first 125 fully completed surveys were used for data analysis. Of the 129 customer responses, the first 125 fully completed surveys were used for data analysis. Figure 1 shows that most of the participants for the associates were female, 111 (88.80%), 12 (9.60%) were male, 2 (1.60%) were non-binary/third gender, and 1 (.66%) preferred not to answer. Figure 2 shows that most participants for customers were female, 74 (59.20%) 47 (37.60%) were male, 0 (0%) were non-binary/third gender, and 12 (1.0%) preferred not to say. 140 of the participants (50%) were employed either part time or full time in some capacity at Walmart. Figure 3 shows that 56 (37.09%) of the associate participants were over 50, 19 (12.58%) were 46-50, 18 (11.92%) were 36-40, 17 (11.26%) were 41-45, 17 (11.26%) were 18-24, 13 (8.61%) were 31-35, 10 (6.62%) were 25-30, and 1 (.66%) preferred not to say. Figure 4 shows that 34 (27.20%) of the customer participants were 18-24, 24 (19.20%) were 21-25, 16 (12.80%) were over 50, 12 (9.60%) preferred not to say, 10 (8.00%) were 36-40, 10 (8.00%) were 41-45, 10 (8.00%) were 46-50, and 7 (5.60%) were 31-35. The interviews were conducted during the same time frame and consisted of 15 associate interviews and 15 customer interviews. Interviews were conducted with twelve study participants using the Interview Guide found in Appendix A. The interview participants were a mixture of men and women of varying age groups. Of the 15 associate interview participants 11 (73.33%) were women and 4 (26.67%) were men. Of the 15 customer interview participants 8 (53.33%) were women and 7 (46.67%) were men. Each of the associate participants had varying years of employment and were in various roles from hourly associate to leadership in some capacity at Walmart stores and Walmart distribution centers. Survey’s participants were obtained from various social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
Themes Discovered

Six themes were developed from the analysis of anonymous surveys, recorded interview transcripts, the conceptual framework, and the literature review and are displayed in Figure 5 (themes associated with surveys) and Figure 6 (themes associated with interviews). There were several other themes that arose during the analysis of data from the surveys and interviews however, the most pertinent and common themes that were identified were the following:

- Shopping experience (Negative, Positive)
- Customer (Perspective, Questions)
- Attitude (Positive, Negative)
- Interaction (Customer, Manager)
- Impact (Customer Satisfaction, Level of Impact)
- Service (Level of Engagement, Standard)

These themes were reoccurring and were common among both the surveys and the interviews that were conducted.

Interpretation of Themes

The six themes that were discovered are discussed below. This researcher used the anonymous survey questions and interview responses from both associate and customer participants to interpret the themes. The five research questions and conceptual framework are answered in the themes and the previous literature that was reviewed lends credence to the findings and solidifies this researcher’s analysis of the findings.

Theme 1- Shopping Experience

The first theme that was identified based on the interviews and the surveys is the experience. Survey and interview participants were asked about the shopping experience from
both an associate perspective and a customer perspective. There were multiple survey and interview questions that looked at different aspects of the shopping experience and associate survey participants (ASP), associate interview participants (AIP), customer survey participants (CSP), and customer interview participants (CIP) felt that the shopping experience was enhanced when there was a positive interaction with associates in the store. For example, survey question 17 asks associates and customers “Does a positive, upbeat attitude and willingness to help make the difference when you are shopping? Why or Why not? (Please explain).” Associate participant 16 (ASP 16) said, “yes, you are more approachable to the customer if you have a good attitude.’ Customer participant 2 (CSP 2) said, Absolutely, energy is contagious.” Most participants both customers and associates and interviews and surveys agreed that the shopping experience is influenced and altered by the way the associates conduct themselves and interact with the customers. Pei et al. (2020) stated “Customers live in an experience economy situation; enterprises’ competitive advantages will come from creating an experience based on products or services to attract customers.” Pei et al. (2020) went on to say that a positive shopping experience will cause a customer to spend more both time and money in a store. The goes back to the conceptual framework that outlines the level engagement can influence the profitability of a retail establishment through increased revenue and return visits. The more engaged and accommodating the associates are the better impression they leave on customers. A customer wants to feel that they are welcome and valued when they are in a store. The perception that their presence and patronage make a different and is valued goes a long way to not only create customer satisfaction, but it also helps to create loyal customer base and sustainability through increased profitability. Return visits drive increased revenue and could lead to an increased customer base.
Customers and associates were both asked if what level of engagement was required for a
customer to feel that the associate made a difference in their shopping experience. Of the 125
associates, 124 felt that at least a normal level of engagement was required and 119 of 125
customers said the same thing. Only 7 out of 250 felt that a low level of engagement was
acceptable in order to make a difference in the shopping experience. Both customers and
associates were also asked if they thought that the level of engagement was an important factor
in customer satisfaction and the shopping experience (AIP4) responded by saying “If I am
directly interaction with them then yes, it is important, if I am just in the store but not working
with customers or in a customer area then no.” Grewal et al. (2017) agreed with that and felt that
the customer shopping experience is directly impacted by interaction with associates and their
level of satisfaction surrounding that interaction. (CIP7) replied by saying, “it makes a big
difference, when this happens, I feel that they wanted me there and that they valued my business.
It goes a long way when an associate takes time to interact with me even if I do not need help or
have not initiated contact with them.” Multiple CSP felt the same way and commented how
associate interaction and engagement enhanced their shopping experience. (CSP86) stated
“feeling welcomed and warmly greeted by an employee can make a significant difference on
how a customer of a business perceives to be welcomed into a business. Make people happy to
be there and they will surely remember quality customer service experiences over a base line,
bare minimum effort.” To lend credence to this thought process Blundell et al. (2020) said the
spread of COVID-19, or what is also known as the coronavirus, has led to customers changing
how they shop in stores. Blundell et al. (2020, p.359-360) went on to say, “the importance of
these problems will depend on how long social distancing measures last and how long-lasting the
impact is on people's spending patterns.”
There are two types of shopping experiences that are generally talked about and that is either negative or positive. With that being said a shopping experience can quickly turn from positive to negative if the level of engagement is not where it needs to be or if the associate is having a off or bad day. Associate interview participant (AIP 3) said “when I come to work, and I am preoccupied or my level of engagement is low, it makes a difference. I feel that I do not offer the best customer service and I am not being fair to the customer. I also feel that it is hard to hide my feelings so I can’t help it.” Survey question 18 asks customers if the knowledge level and engagement level of the associate makes a difference in the shopping experience and it asks the associate if they feel that their knowledge level is important. Both groups indicated that both knowledge and engagement impact the shopping experience. (CSP93) said, “yes, definitely because you as the customer, won’t get annoyed if they know what they are talking about.”

The data revealed a mixed feeling of how much engagement was important for a positive customer experience however, 95% of the survey participants and about 80% of the interview participants felt that some level of engagement was mandatory in order for them to consider the shopping experience even as slightly positive.

**Negative Experience.** Negativity comes into the equation when an associate ignores or fails to acknowledge customers. This can impact the shopping experience and hinder the possibility of future visits from a customer that has had a negative experience. All three of these questions focus on the impact on the shopping experience based on negative interactions with associates in some manner. RQ5 is centered around the possibility of a return visit based on interactions while in the store.

RQ2 asks, “What are the perceptions of customers as they relate to shopping experiences when they encounter associates not engaged with the customer?” According to (ASP24), there is
no impact when asked how they thought the customer felt when an associate does not acknowledge them. When asked the same question, (ASP75) said the customer felt angry. Similarly, (CSP12) said they felt discouraged when they were not acknowledged, and it appeared as if (CSP27) agreed with (ASP24) and stated there was no impact if not acknowledged by an associate. (CIP6) said “probably 80% of the time I feel like if I have a certain expression on my face or appear to need help, most associates will go out of their way to look in the other direction. Some associates are willing to help but the majority do not want to be bothered” when asked how often they felt that an associate did not want to be at work and was trying to avoid acknowledging them. (AIP2) said, “I see some of the people I work with purposely try to avoid customers, in fact sometimes they joke about it and think that it is funny. They tell me that customers are a necessary inconvenience.” (AIP6) said, “If I do not enjoy my job and it shows then it will impact my interactions. However, I like what I do and even if I did not, I would not let it impact my performance.” When asked if they felt their attitude towards your job can impact the customers that are shopping in your store. About 80 percent of Walmart ASP felt that they offered some sort of customer service but agreed that many associates could be friendlier and more helpful.

RQ3 asks, “What is the impact on the shopping experience of customers when associates have recently had a negative interaction with their manager and then attempts to engage with customers?” (AIP5) and (AIP6) both felt that a negative interaction with their manager had no impact on their engagement with customers because they said they did not let it bother them. Whereas (CIP9) said that they could usually tell that an associate was frustrated and (ASP79) said “I try to maintain a positive interaction at work with everybody, I try not to let my emotions show I am having a bad day. I fake it until I make it and I will make sure I say hi to everyone I
encounter”. According to Wang et al. (2020), associates who have negative interactions with supervisors and managers tend to become withdrawn and silent, these are less likely to be engaged and have lower job satisfaction.

RQ5 asked, “What impact does a customer’s shopping experience have on their tendency to return to a retail establishment for future spending?” According to Balaji et al. (2016), where customers previously shared negative experiences by word of mouth in person they now have turned to social media to share displeasures with things such as shopping experiences vastly increasing their immediate audience and allowing others to way in on their experiences as well. Fu et al. (2015), contend that customers’ communcation by word of mouth shapes shopping habits; and can be based on social media platforms as avenues to share experiences and criticism. Most customers perceive their communication as a way of letting others know to be aware of possible negative experiences. This type of communication can not only stop others from possibly shopping at a particular store for fear of similar experiences but also may be an indicator of the likelihood that a customer will not return. Data collected in the surveys for this study suggest that a customer who feels that they did not receive the attention they deserve will share their experiences, an example was (CSP64) who was asked “How often have you felt like you were bothering an associate when you asked a question?” and the response was less than half the time whereas (CSP52) responded by saying all the time. Many of the customer participants felt associates that they encountered were not engaged enough but the ones that were made an effort to help when asked.

**Positive Experience.** A positive shopping experience can bring customers back time and again. Associate engagement is about the attitudes and level by which the associate is connected with the customer and the organization where they work (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). Being
engaged or connected with customers is what can make a difference in the shopping experience. (AIP7) said “I think the more we interact and help, the better the experience” when asked if they thought their level of engagement is an important factor in a customer being satisfied and having an enjoyable shopping experience. (CIP9) was asked what level of engagement from an associate was necessary to make a difference in their shopping experience to which they replied, “I don’t know that there is a certain level required, however, it is important that they make an effort to interact with me when I need assistance and not make me feel like I am an inconvenience.”

A positive shopping experience is connected to customer satisfaction and customer retention. A large percentage of CSP’s communicated that they were more satisfied with their shopping experience when they had a positive interaction with associates. (CIP15) said “when I encounter associates that seem like they do not want to help it leaves a lasting impression and I am less likely to go back, however if I have a good experience, I will remember that and most likely seek out an associate at that store again. It gives me a sense that it is a friendly environment, and I would be comfortable seeking help again.” Employee innovation and problem solving ideas can be a driver in sustainability of a retailer by setting it apart and creating a positive customer shopping experience (Xu & Wang, 2020). (AIP9) said that they felt that it was their responsibility to provide assistance and welcome customers to their store. They felt if they did not make an impact or a difference then the customer might go somewhere else to shop. They said they did not necessarily feel that knowledge level was a huge factor, but engagement was definitely important. When asked, “As an associate do you think that your knowledge level of your job and engagement your engagement level with customers matters?” Some other AIPs agreed that the knowledge level was not as important of a factor as the engagement levels. They
felt that an associate could still provide excellent customer service and not have all the answers; it was more about the presentation.

The conceptual framework is also addressed under this theme, this is when leaders are allowing associates to be a part of engaging with customers which leads to them feeling valued within their store and they in turn create an enjoyable experience for our customers, leading to increased revenue through return visits. Associate satisfaction, level of commitment, and job performance are three terms related to an associate’s dedication to the organization, their perception of the work environment, as well as how motivated they are to providing exceptional service to the customers they are employed to assist (Skowron et al., 2020). Some 84% of CSP’s said they felt frustrated, angry, and discouraged when they were not acknowledged by an associate while shopping and only 14% said there was no impact. When the ASPs were asked the same question 62% said they thought that customers were frustrated, angry, or discouraged and 38% said there was no impact. This data shows that some of the associates have a good understanding of the needs of the customers while others feel that they do not make a difference in the customer experience. The biggest take away is when the associate feels valued and as if their participation makes a difference or has an impact then they are more likely to engage.

Theme 2- Customer

The second theme that was identified was customer. This really is one of the biggest parts of the research. The goal is to discover how the levels of associate engagement have a role in customer satisfaction which impacts the customer shopping experience and will then impact the store’s revenue because of the impact on the likelihood of return visits. There are different types of customers that exist in a retail environment and organizations such as Walmart must learn to cater to all of them. In order to drive customer satisfaction through associate engagement the
retailer must be able to meet the needs of a diverse group on a regular basis. In order to deliver a positive shopping experience and drive increased sales as well as generate revenue through return visits Walmart has to be able to adapt to all the different types of customers that they service. According to Clarke et al., (2017), retailers must understand both the internal and external customers’ expectations and be able to cater to each individual if they hope to create a lasting impression and a long-term relationship. Hurst (2014) contends that internal customers and external customers have different expectations and perceptions of what they deserve and how they should be treated. The data that was gathered lends credence to this based on the responses that varied based on whether the respondent was a customer or an associate. While some the responses from both customers and associates were similar and the data is evidence that most have the same thought processes as to what levels of engagement are necessary for a customer to feel valued, there is some difference (about 20%) when it comes to whether acknowledging a customer is necessary or not.

Customer Perspective. The customer’s perspective is what drives the communication regarding a store interaction. It does not matter how the associate perceives the interaction if a customer is not satisfied or feels that they did not receive the service that they deserved then it will be perceived as a negative visit or interaction. CSP’s were asked what their perception was of their shopping experience when they encounter an associate that is not engaged or does not seem happy with their job. (CSP13) said, “I feel like it represents the company and how they prioritize the customer experience. If it was an issue with the company, I wouldn’t encounter disengaged employees as often as I do.” (CSP78) said their impression would be “that customer service is not a priority for the company, CS is more than just being helpful, it is to create a positive experience/interaction with the customers.” (CIP1) was asked the same question and
responded by saying “if I encounter an associate who I feel does not want to help me, I move on to someone else and ask for help. I will let someone know that came across an associate that was rude in my opinion. I think that people who work in a service industry should understand that they will have to help all type of people and if they are not willing to do that then they should not work there.” While associates are not the only factor that impacts the shopping experience it is an important one. Customers' evaluation of retail salespeople is based on multiple criteria, and a factor external to the individual is the store's ambience. If a customer feels that the associate is not measuring up it may not matter what other factors are in place because they will not move past the bad experience with the associate to measure other aspects of the shopping experience.

Customer perspective is also about the perception of value and selection among many other things related to the store. “Stores have distinct environments, and marketers understand that the environment of a store is an important part of the shopping experience” (Sharma & Stafford, 2000). The customer perspective on value ties into a lot of different elements, including ease of shopping, location, price, product availability, options, and accessibility.

Contemporary retailing is a good example of an industry wherein the drivers of customer value are very context-dependent, and a strong customer value proposition is crucial for competitive advantage. Many retailers operate with several product categories, carry competing brands, and cater for fragmented market segments in both offline and online environments (Rintamaki & Kirves, 2017, p. 159).

Being able to understand what the customer perceives as values is crucial in being able to create a conducive environment that not only attracts them but keeps them returning. This is vital to obtaining and retaining loyal customers that can see the value in the organization and the associates that are employed there.
According to Masterson (2001, p. 595), customer perception uses what she calls a “trickle-down model: Employee’s perception of fairness → Employee’s Organizational Commitment → Employee’s Effort and Prosocial Behaviors → Customer’s Perception of Employee fairness → Customer’s Reaction to Employee → Customer’s Reaction to Organization.” This further supports the data from the research to show that the customer perception is one of the biggest factors contributing to whether the shopping experience is successful and considered to be positive or if the organization needs to look into how to create the inviting environment that will give them the competitive advantage.

A company has to address the needs and wishes of its customers adequately in order to ensure that they will buy the company’s products and services, experience a high degree of satisfaction with these goods and services, and then become loyal customers of that company (Henning-Thurau & Thurau, 2003, p. 24).

If the customer does not see the value or perceive that they are valued then the effort from the organization becomes fruitless, future sales with that customer will be jeopardized and depending on the level of frustration, the customer could share negative experiences with individuals that they know which could shape their perceptions before even entering the establishment.

**Customer Questions.** Associates are often required to answer questions for customers as a part of their job duties. Some thoughts that arise when it comes to this are:

1. Does the associate make an effort to give an accurate answer and truly help?
2. Do customers really need help or are they trying to bother the associates?
3. Does the associate tell the customer when they do not know the right answer or just make something up to get the customer to walk away?
4. Does the associate ignore the customer or push them off on another associate?

According to the data collected, it is clear that associates and customers are in agreement, most associates made an honest effort to give accurate information and according to all 125 associates and 112 of 125 customers 50% of the time or less the associate gave inaccurate information. There were 37 or 125 associates that felt that a customer was trying to be annoying and asking unnecessary questions, but they assisted them regardless. CSP56 was one of the 13 that felt associates did not want to help and in fact said that most associates “Usually they act as if they are busy with other stuff.” (CSP15) said, “Sometimes yes and sometimes they pawn you off to another associate who may or may not know either” (CSP60) did not agree and again was one of the few that had a bad experience stating, “They are usually avoiding people or act like you are inconveniencing them. That is if you can even find one.”

CIPs had mixed comments when asked if they felt associates were honest when they did not know the answer to a question. Some 8 out 15 felt that associate knowingly gave them wrong information when asked a question that they did not know the answer to instead of finding the right answer or getting someone else to help. Three AIPs admitted to knowingly giving the wrong information at least once in the time they had worked for the company. (AIP11) said that they felt that customers purposely wait until they are helping someone else to ask for assistance and then they become inpatient or angry when they have to wait. (AIP1) said “I do not think that customers are asking questions to bother me, I feel like they would not ask if they truly did not need help. It is my job to assist them and offer good customer service. They are the whole reason that we have jobs.” There was also a mixed set of response that came from the surveys however more survey participants felt that associates were trying to be helpful and provided the
information that they were looking for when asked. Some survey participants did say that there a few associates not really making an effort but those were isolated comments.

**Theme 3- Attitude**

Attitude can be applied to many different people as it relates to this research. There is the manager’s attitude, the associate’s attitude, and the customer’s attitude. It also refers to both a positive and negative attitude and perception that others have about an attitude. There were several survey and interview questions that were based on attitude or perceptions of attitude and the study looked at two different perspectives, that of the customer and that of the associate. While in some aspects of the research opinions and perceptions varied greatly, some opinions were like-minded across associates and customers. One of the biggest things that both customers and associates agreed on was that some level of engagement from associates is required in order to create a positive shopping experience.

The conceptual framework can be addressed by managers’ and associates’ attitudes as well as managers interactions with associates. The managers attitude often sets the pace for the rest of the store. When managers make associates feel like their presence matters, associates tend to buy into the organizational values and help to work towards the organizational goals (Tangirala et al., 2007). A manager’s attitude toward their job, their associates, and their store can go a long way in creating a positive shopping experience if they set the standard that engagement is important. When associates see their manager having a positive attitude and treating them with respect, they in turn have a positive attitude, and work to share their positivity with the customers that they are assisting (Tangirala et al., 2007).

An associate’s attitude is what has the biggest impact on the customer experience because they are what is called a frontline employee. They usually work in customer facing areas of the
store and are considered to be the face or voice of the organization. In order to gain the competitive advantage and continuously develop higher expectations around delivering an outstanding customer experience, organizations must empower their associates and rely on them to not only develop these skills but also be able to deliver them in any environment (Yoo & Arnold, 2016). When survey participants were asked, “How do you, as the customer feel about your shopping experience when you have had a chance to engage in interaction with associates and managers at Walmart?” (CSP57) responded by saying, “when an associate helps me and is kind to me, I have a better shopping experience.” (CSP60) said “If it is a positive interaction, I feel more satisfied with my purchase and choice of stores. If negative it makes me question whether I should keep shopping, there.” Which was very similar however, there was added thought around negative interaction as well which this data goes back to support the research that engagement level is crucial.

The customer’s attitude towards the shopping experience is what will dictate how they communicate with others. The ASPs were asked, “As an associate of Walmart do you think your attitude towards your job can impact the customers that are shopping in your store?” Several associates answered this question with some variation of yes and most felt that impact was significant such as (ASP7) that responded by saying, “yes, whether it’s a good or bad day. The way you react has a big impact on the attitude of the customer.” Another response from (ASP15) was, “Of course. If you seem happy to be at work and ready to help customers, it will change their moods as well.” Additionally (ASP19) chimed in by saying “Yes, customers will take your attitude and make it their own. If they think you think Walmart is terrible then that is how they will speak about Walmart to other people and the same is for your positive attitude about Walmart.” There was one lone associate that said “Not really, everyone is an employer
somewhere and we all have good and bad days giving the indication that the attitude still mattered however, customers would be understanding because everyone is entitled to have a bad day.

**Positive Attitude.** Associates and customers agreed that a positive attitude makes a difference in the shopping experience. When asked, “Do you think that interacting with associates change your shopping experience?” CSP8 responded by saying, “A positive interaction with an employee or manager will make me want to stay and continue to spend more money during that visit. A negative interaction in the past, has made me leave my cart of merchandise and go shop somewhere else.” While a positive, helpful attitude is welcomed in many cases not all customers necessarily enjoy an over helpful associate. CSP17 said, “To me it saves time. But it gets frustrating when they try to step into my personal space by providing product suggestions I don't need.” This was not the only customer to say that sometimes associates are over the top with trying to be helpful and they become overbearing. The fact is that customers can perceive associates as too helpful just as they view them as unengaged.

Associates’ job satisfaction and positive attitude has a positive impact on perceived value by customers. The interactions and engagement levels are typically higher for associates that are satisfied with their roles. This transfers to providing a positive attitude projected at customers during service interactions translating to a positive shopping experience (Charni et al., 2019). Survey and interview participants commented consistently about a positive attitude making a difference in the shopping experience. This theme emerged in almost every question that was asked of interview and survey participants from both groups of individuals (customers and associates).
Negative Attitude. Attitude is perceived differently depending on who is making the assumption. Preconceived notions or thoughts based on others’ observation can impact the ability to make an accurate assessment. Once an organization has an image for not being customer friendly it becomes increasingly difficult to overcome that and it is an obstacle that can impact overall profitability and sustainability. Social media makes it very easy for customers to share experiences quickly and a bigger audience. Customers are more likely to share negative experiences in an effort to “save” someone else from having to endure the same experience. According to Chen and Tao (2019), word of mouth, customer-to-customer communication, is becoming more widespread, with the Internet and social media being so readily available and accessible at any time experience sharing has become easy. Online feedback has become increasingly popular and really becomes a review that is accessible by anyone searching. Not only do other consumers use this feedback to determine shopping choices, but other retailers in the area will also use the feedback especially regarding a negative or bad attitude to learn what not to do or what they can improve on within their organization (Liang & Wang, 2019).

Theme 4- Interaction

“The interaction process between customers and the surrounding environment involves the exchange and transfer of information, knowledge and skills. The positive impact of interaction on enterprises and customers lies in that customers could provide their own information and knowledge resources to the interaction process” (Guan et al., 2020). This confirms the data that was analyzed while the interactions between customers and associates are the associate’s responsibility or part of their role with the organization, the customer has an active part. “Interaction between firms and customers is simply the process of co-creating value between them” (Yu et al., p. 298). There are several different interactions that occur in a retail
environment such as Walmart and there are many individuals that participate in those interactions. The beginning of value creation is interaction,

**Customer interaction.** Associates and managers routinely interact with customers as a part of their responsibility every day. Customers also interact with each other and share information regarding their shopping experiences. According to Guerrero et al. (2018), customers are becoming substitutes for managers in service oriented environments when it comes to providing associates with engagement feedback and empowering them to feel more in control of their role and encouraging them to contribute to engagement with others.

**Manager interactions.** When associates and managers have disagreement, and it is in view of others it can negatively impact the customer shopping experience and the associates’ attitude. Based on the surveys it is apparent that there are times associates have been exposed to negative interactions between fellow associates and their managers and in some cases customers are a witness to this contact. While some customers claim to have witnessed some negative interactions not all have. Some 52 out 125 customers just about 42% claimed they have not encountered a situation where they witnessed a disagreement between an associate and manager, which resulted in an associate appearing to be upset. However, some 66 out of 125 associates or 53% of associates claimed to have been subjected to this behavior more than 10 times. Additionally, some 121 out 125 associates have witnessed disagreements between managers and associates at least one time regardless of tenure. Not all interactions with managers are negative and sometimes managers are just the mediators between customers and associates that may have a misunderstanding or just need additional support. Their interactions with both customers and associates must be positive to drive core values and help achieve company goals. This is what creates sustainability and brings customers back.
The Effects of Associate Engagement

Theme 5 - Impact.

Impact has many different aspects that can be related to the study such as level of engagement, customer service, shopping experience, interactions between customers and associates, associates with fellow associates, and outsiders that are just listening to feedback. Customer to customer feedback is one of the fastest ways for people to share experiences that they have had with a retailer and can be one of the most damaging impacts for an organization when the feedback is not positive. According to Guan et al. (2020), it is believed that customer interaction has a remarkable impact on associate inventiveness and transforming behaviors. Customer interaction can be tied to associate creativity and positive behaviors. All the themes seem to interconnect and are relevant to this research study.

Customer Satisfaction. The feeling of being valued leads to satisfaction. Customer survey question 4 asked, “As a Walmart customer do you think the level of engagement from an associate is an important factor in being satisfied and having an enjoyable shopping experience?” (CSP48) responded by saying, “Yes I do. Because if they engage with you, it seems like they are taking pride in their work. They notice you and that makes you happy because not only are they doing what they are supposed to do but going above their job to make sure you are noticed and doing okay.” (CSP33) had a different opinion and said, “I think having staff who are pleasant and polite helps make an enjoyable shopping experience, but I think there are factors such as what is stocked in the shop the price the cleanliness etc. that are more important and would impact on my shopping experience more.” Associates also commented on this question, which was phrased a little differently to gain their perspective. Survey question 4 for the associates asked, “As a Walmart associate do you think your level of engagement is an important factor in a customer being satisfied and having an enjoyable shopping experience?” (ASP9) answered this
by saying “engaging with people is a good thing especially when you notice a look of confusion, all it takes is a simple hello and did you need help to totally make them feel better about their shopping experience.” Additionally, (ASP21) elaborated by saying, “As someone who has worked in online pickup and delivery, as well as the front end, it is extremely important for me to be engaged. Being invested in our customers is a huge part of both roles that I have been in.” Customer satisfaction is more than engagement; it is about the entire shopping experience, including product availability, associate engagement, and clean environment. “In order to achieve higher customer satisfaction, firms should improve customers’ perception of empowerment through treating them fairly, which makes them have more freedom to fully play their roles” (Han et al., 2019, p. 51).

**Level of Impact.** The level of impact will vary from person to person and will depend on the overall experience. If a customer requires little to no interaction, then there will be no impact when there is a low level of engagement from associates. (CSP17) said, “Just the right amount of engagement would make it better. Shopping is a family experience and most times I would like privacy.” When asked if level of engagement was an important factor in order to have an enjoyable shopping experience. (CSP32) weighed in by saying “Not necessarily only if I need it. If too many people, try to engage it would have the opposite effect.” Further, several ASPs felt that their mood had a great impact on their interactions with customers. There were a couple of questions regarding this, and associates shared their thoughts. (ASP10) said, “Yes. If you’re in a bad mood it will impact your attitude towards customers.” According to (ASP14) an attitude shows on your face and will have an impact on the customer. “Customer interactions with each other in social or audience settings have a significant impact both in short-term feelings toward a service, and long-term attitudinal loyalty” (N/A, 2020, p. 24). There is a big impact created by
word-of-mouth, customer-to-customer experience sharing, when this occurs it is beneficial if organizations create a strategy to compile this information and use it to course correct any negative behaviors that may hurt sustainability (Chen & Gao, 2019).

**Theme 6- Service**

Providing service can mean many different things. It is related to all RQs and the conceptual framework of this case study. The associates provide customer service for to the customers, and this is done through their engagement and interactions. Depending on what type of service they provide will depend on what type of experience the customer will have while shopping. There is no set standard for a certain acceptable service level, but the basic skill is to at least acknowledge the presence of a customer when they come into your immediate area. “A service failure is a service incident that leads customers to perceive that the service has failed to meet their expectations” (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020, p. 99). It is not just the organization that has an active role in service to the customer. The customers themselves have taken on a bigger role and are active players in the outcomes of service.

With the development of technology and the increase of personalized need, customer can be willing to play more active roles in services. Customers’ power during the interaction with service provider increases gradually. Empowering customer is necessary to help customer play their active roles effectively in services (Han et al., 2019, p. 51).

**Level of Engagement.** This study asked interview and survey participants about levels of engagement including low level, normal level, moderately high level, and high level. Furthermore, they were asked about the impact of associates that were not engaged which choices of no impact, discouraged, angry, and frustrated. There were two perspectives one from
an associate’s point of view or thought process and the other came from the customer
perspective. Surprisingly, the majority of the time the thought processes were aligned, and
associates appeared to be aware of customer perception and feelings. The level of engagement
expected and given vastly differed in some cases and when this happened it created a negative
shopping experience.

Associates and customers were asked numerous questions regarding levels of
engagement. The questions varied from levels of engagement based on interaction to being
disengaged or not acknowledging customers at all. They were also asked about negative
interactions with managers and the impact on their performance. Associates articulated several
instances that they witnessed negative interactions between managers and associates that
impacted associate performance. They were asked two specific questions regarding negative
interactions and those questions were:

1. When you have recently had a negative interaction with your manager, and you attempt
to engage with a customer do you think there is a negative impact?

2. Have you ever witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that
appeared to have upset the associate?

(AIP8) answered the first question by saying that they had never had a negative interaction with
a manager in their location so there was no negative impact. (AIP8) answered the second
question by saying “I know associates that had negative interactions with managers, and I also
witnessed it on more than one occasion. It seemed to make the associate sad and although they
were not rude to customers you could tell that it impacted the amount they wanted to talk to other
people.” This was similar to what other AIPs had to say and one CIP shared that when associates
have a negative attitude they just leave without shopping.
Service Standard. The minimum acceptable level of service and the point at which the shopping experience becomes impacted will depend on the individual. Expectations are unique to the person and can vary from customer to customer. What one person feels is quality or acceptable another may deem unengaged and rude. Simply put the standard must be set by the industry and industry leaders such as Walmart must come up with innovative ways to distinguish themselves from competitors. Typically, customers set the standard of expectations and as the industry changes the standards and bar of expectations get higher. “Service failures can lead to declines in customer confidence, increases in customer defection, and negative word-of-mouth” (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020, p. 100). Once the standard has been set and the organization fails to provide the service that is expected whether it is through a lack of engagement or a rude associate the impact is great. “Moreover, service failures can impair a firm's profitability and reduce customers' loyalty towards the firm. Thus, firms must understand the mental processes that impact customers' reactions to service failures” (Srivastava & Gosain, 2020, p. 100). Gaining an understanding into what drives the customer’s perception on service will go a long way to correcting the issue and providing the service that is expected which will lead to a pleasant shopping experience. CSP’s commented that when they encounter a rude or disengaged associate and do not get the service, they expected it impacts their experience and changes their mood. (CSP42) stated “Creates a poor atmosphere and I avoid that branch” another participant who said, “I feel as if those employees are only there for the paycheck and not to do the job” (CSP80). The ASPs also weighed in on this subject and had similar thoughts. (ASP21) responded by saying “I think engagement is more important that knowledge. Of course, having the knowledge is helpful for the customer, but no one knows everything, so a customer is much more likely to understand that if you are pleasant and engaged with them.” Another response
came from (AIP12) who stated, “definitely, I think that with Covid and other things going on today many people feel like others are not willing to help or will be standoffish. I think that if you are able to assist and interact without hesitation then it will stand out in the memories of the customer.”

**Representation and Visualization of the Data**

The data below is the visualization of what was coded in this qualitative case study research. Some of the questions are depicted below to show similarity and difference in responses between customers and associates. These figures listed below relate to the perception of associate engagement, the perception of acknowledgement by associates, impact of associate knowledge levels, and associate/manager interactions causing disengaged associates.

Through the data analysis it was discovered that on some the questions that were asked, the customers and associates had similar views and on other questions customers and associates had a different perspective. Looking at survey question 3 which asked, “What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that an associate made a difference in their shopping experience?” Figures 7 and 8 depict that while customers consider a normal to moderately high level of engagement acceptable, associates thought that customers needed a moderately high to high level of engagement to be satisfied. This shows that a lack of understanding aids in the problem. Another noticeable difference was with survey question 5, which asked about how a customer feels when they are not acknowledged (Figures 9 and 10). Some 104 of the 125 customers said they were frustrated, angry, or discouraged while only 76 of 125 associates agreed with them. The other 49 associates felt that there was no impact if they did not acknowledge the customer during their shopping experience. Associates and customers also had a different perspective on seeing a negative interaction between an associate and manager
(Figures 13 and 14) with associates saying they witnessed it often and customers saying they had never or rarely been exposed to any never interactions between associates and their managers. One thing that both customers and associates agreed on was that when they asked an associate for help, they usually provided the right information (Figures 11 and 12).

**Figure 8**

Associate Perception on Level of Engagement

**Q3 - What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?**

![Associate Perception Chart](image)

**Figure 9**

Customer Perception on Level of Engagement

**Q3 - What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?**

![Customer Perception Chart](image)
Figure 10

Customer Perception on Acknowledgement

Q5 - As a Walmart customer, how do you feel when you are not acknowledged by an associate you encounter while shopping in the store?

- Frustrated
- Angry
- Discouraged
- There is no impact

Figure 11

Associate Perception on Acknowledgement

Q5 - How do you think a customer feels when you do not acknowledge them while they are shopping in the store?

- Frustrated
- Angry
- Discouraged
- No impact
**Figure 12**

Customer Thoughts on Associate Providing Accurate Information

**Q8 - On average how many times have you asked a Walmart associate for assistance and they gave you the wrong information?**

- Less than half the time
- Half the time
- More than half the time
- All the time

**Figure 13**

Associate Thoughts on Providing Accurate Information

**Q8 - On average how many times has someone asked you for assistance and you gave the wrong information?**

- Less than half the time
- Half the time
- More than half the time
- All the time
Figure 14

Customer Observations on Interactions

Q13 - How many times have you witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?

More than 10 times
7-9 times
4-6 times
3-5 times
1-2 times
Never

Figure 15

Associate Observations on Interactions

Q15 - How many times have you witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?

More than 10 times
7-9 times
4-6 times
3-5 times
1-2 times
Never
Relationship of Findings

This qualitative case study research revealed six themes and the researcher was able to relate those six themes to the research questions, the conceptual framework, the anticipated themes, the literature, and the problem that was studied. Each survey and interview participant provided their perspectives on levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, the customer shopping experience, and the impact on future revenue for Walmart through the questions that were asked. The relationship is discussed for each section below:

**The Research Questions**

The research questions attempted to understand the role that levels of associate engagement play in customer satisfaction and the impact on the customer shopping experience. The relationship of the research questions to each theme is identified below. The themes are associated with one another as participant responses overlapped the ideas and concepts with each other throughout their responses. The interview and the anonymous survey questions were structured to aid in answering the research questions presented in Section 1. The six themes discussed are each aligned to at least one of the research questions.

**Research Question One.** The first research question was to understand what levels of associate engagement were needed to make a difference in the customer shopping experience. Continuously throughout the interviews and surveys, associate and customer participants answered questions that provided data to support that some level of engagement is vital to having a positive shopping experience. The research participants referred to associates being engaged, smiling, willing to help, and making an effort as some of the things that are factors in creating an enjoyable shopping experience. The participants commented that associate engagement goes a long way with determining if they will visit a particular store again or go somewhere else in the
future. The participants stated that feeling like they were welcomed to shop and that they mattered had a huge impact on their visit.

**Research Question Two.** The second research question was to understand the perceptions of customers regarding their shopping experience when they encounter associates that are not engaged. Both associates and customers that were interview and survey participants spoke about the impact of associates who seemed disengaged or angry had on the overall mood of the store and what the potential impact to customers would be. Interview participants had the chance to articulate this in more detail, but the consensus was the same if an associate appeared not to be engaged, customers looked for someone else to assist them. This lead to frustration and anger, in some cases customers said they would just go somewhere else or leave without all the things they came to shop for during their shopping trip.

Associates gave similar accounts and stated that sometimes their mood impacted their ability to adequately provide quality service however, they did their best to not let it impact the way that they interacted with customers and fellow associates. One of the most surprising comments was that a fair number of customers blamed Walmart for the associate’s level of engagement saying that they felt it was not the best working environment and Walmart was known for not treating associates well.

**Research Question Three.** The third research question was to understand what impact there was on a shopping experience when customers encountered an associate that recently had a negative interaction with their manager and then try to engage with them. This question was asked in some form to all participants regardless of whether interview or survey and associate or customer. Most customers commented that they had not really seen an associate and a manager have a negative interaction, however, they had been involved with an associate who seemed to
be upset. Associates painted a different picture, and several said that they had witnessed negative interactions between their managers and fellow associates. Some spoke about how it impacted the mood of the associate and others commented on how some associates just shrugged it off and kept working. Some associates gave personal accounts of trying to provide customer service and interact with customers after arguing with their manager. They said that it was difficult and one specific comment was “I fake it until I make it.” This associate was not alone in the commenting on how they would try to hide their frustration or the fact that they were upset. Some commented that although they tried, they were unsuccessful, and it showed. There were a few customers that had witnessed negative interactions and stated that they felt sorry for the associate. One CIP said that they were embarrassed for the associate and thought about telling someone but changed their mind for fear of causing problems for themselves and the other associate.

**Research Question Four.** The fourth research question was to understand how the customer felt when they were able interact with associates and managers during a shopping trip. This question was answered through many of the survey and interview questions and resoundingly the same among most, the interaction with associates made a difference. It was just a matter if the interaction was positive or negative and to what level and degree the associate offered assistance. There were times questions or requests were able to be resolved quickly and others it took some work on part of the associate. The partnership with other store associate and managers in order to assist someone was noticed an appreciated. Some customers commented that there were times they do not need assistance but still being acknowledged gives the indication that they are valued, and their business is important.

**Research Question Five.** The fifth research question was to understand how the customer’s shopping experience impacted their decision to return to an establishment for future
spending. Interview participants articulated that when they were able to positively interact with associates and managers in the store it impacted their mood and, in some cases, they spent more time and money in the store because they felt valued. Survey participants communicated in similar fashion and said that if their shopping experience was not to their standard on many occasions, they would not return and would go to a different store. Both survey and interview participants said that if the experience was negative, it not only impacted the amount of time and money, they spent in the store during that particular trip, but it also determined if they would return in the future. Customers and associates were in agreement when it came to this question and all felt that a bad shopping experience could negatively impact the organization and the possibility of additional loss of revenue through word-of-mouth recommendations based on the shopping experience.

**The Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework relates to the findings in that it shows the point of connection when associates value the organization and/or their job their levels of engagement are higher and interact more with customers. When they interact more with customers, the customers tend to be more satisfied with the organization leading to a positive shopping experience. When the shopping experience is positive the customer tends to spend more money and returns to shop again, this increases revenue for Walmart. The conceptual framework was compared against the information that was collected through the anonymous surveys and one-on-one interviews to see how the data compares against data that was previously gathered in previous research as well. The findings showed that the conceptual framework was accurate and through customer and associate perceptions interaction and level of associate engagement is a driving factor in creating an enjoyable or positive shopping experience.
The first element of the conceptual framework is leaders empowering associates. According to Fernandez and Moldogaziev (2015), empowering associates is commonly used to promote innovation, increase the quality of service provided, and increase customer satisfaction through associates being more satisfied with their job and performing better. Both associate and customer survey participants agreed and felt that when associates are given encouragement and allowed to perform their jobs without hassle it made them more engaged.

The second element of the conceptual framework is associates value their role in the organization. Survey and interview associate participants said that when they are working, they want to provide great customer service because they feel they can make a difference and help customers. They said that they wanted to be good at what they do and did not want to be viewed as not helpful or lazy. Some associates said that the customers perception of them mattered and was also important to the success of the organization. Survey and interview customer participants said that they could tell when an associate like their job and wanted to do well or if they were just there to collect a paycheck.

The third element of the conceptual framework is associates positively interacting with customers. This was the basis of the research, to determine if the level of associate engagement impacted the customers’ shopping experience. Based on the case study research findings through the anonymous surveys and one-on-one interviews, both customers and associates agreed that interacting with customers was probably the one of the most important factors in determining the impact on the shopping experience.

The fourth element of the conceptual framework is customers appreciate engagement and are satisfied with the organization. Customers voiced concerns with associates that did not seem engaged or went out of the way to avoid them; they reported feeling frustration, anger, and a
sense of discouragement. However, when they were acknowledged and assisted, they felt valued and like the associate wanted them in the store. Associates provided comments around the fact that they are responsible to make sure customers get the help that they need, feel welcome in the store, and that they will want to return for later shopping trips.

The fifth element of the conceptual framework is the shopping experience is positive. The distinction between a positive and a negative shopping experience can be made by the levels of associate engagement and the shopping environment. (AIP3) spoke about how being preoccupied and not being totally engaged having an impact on customers. Fu et al. (2015) claim that customers will share negative experiences far more often than positive ones, so it is important that the lasting impression that is made is a positive one.

The sixth and final element of the conceptual framework is increased revenue for Walmart. According to Clarke et al., (2017), retailers must understand external customers’ expectations and be able to meet the needs of a diverse group of individual if they are going to be able to create a good impression and a long term relationship. Associates and customers said that the levels of engagement and whether or not the shopping experience was positive had a huge impact on return visits from customers which contributes to increased revenue.

**Anticipated Themes**

This qualitative case study research discovered certain themes through the surveys and interviews that were conducted. The findings were analyzed, and the themes will be presented in the presentation of findings where a detailed description of what was discovered will be discussed. There were not any unexpected themes that were discovered during this study. The themes align with what the research expected and provided additional literature to support previously researched literature.
Through the qualitative research project, this researcher expected to find that levels of associate engagement had an impact on customer satisfaction, which determined if a customer’s shopping experience was positive or negative. This researcher was not surprised by any themes that emerged. Some of the associate comments and the open admission of associates saying that they sometimes ignore customers or try to avoid them was surprising. While this researcher had some idea that avoidance took place it was surprising that it was admitted in the one-on-one interviews. The surveys did not come as a surprise because they were anonymous, and this researcher felt that participants would be more comfortable sharing. The six themes that were discovered are interrelated and survey participants perspectives connected the themes to each other. The interview participants also received questions that were designed to expand on the impact of certain levels of engagement and how it connects customer satisfaction and the shopping experience. The six major themes that were discovered were the shopping experience, the customer, attitude, interaction, impact, and service. There were additional sub-themes for each of the major themes.

**The Literature**

The review of previous literature identified themes that emerged through prior studies completed on levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the impact on the shopping experience. This study supported the previous literature and the themes that were discovered. The literature review focused primarily on how the levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the customers’ shopping experience were connected and impacted future revenue for an organization. It is important for organizations to understand that the associates determine the sustainability of their business. Indeed, the way they interact with the customers that come into the store is one of the biggest factors. Organizations need to address
when there is a low level of engagement by their associates. According to Lee et al., (2017), engaged associates provide better customer service, assist in providing a more positive customer experience which leads to increased customer satisfaction having a positive impact for the organization.

In the research conducted for this qualitative case study, there is significant evidence that levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the shopping experience do impact future revenue for an organization based on the potential for a customer to return or not to return based on their perceptions of treatment and how their overall time in the store felt to them. According to Sunder (2013), Six Sigma can be used as a tool in associate engagement because it gets the associate involved in the improvement process and gives them a sense of empowerment. The data that was collected through the surveys and interviews and analyzed provided similar data to what was reviewed during this research.

The starting point for the purpose of comparative gain or loss for this study was found in the literature related to associate engagement and customer satisfaction. Kwon and Park (2019) believe that creating a formal theory surrounding associate engagement can help an organization develop a plan to address and fix low levels of associate engagement. This researcher found that when a customer felt that they were not acknowledged or appropriately assisted they did not have a positive shopping experience. Similarly, when the associates interacted with them, they felt welcomed, and the experience was almost always positive.

Most of the literature addressing the associate engagement and customer satisfaction referred to interaction, customers perception, impact, and attitude. This researcher found these “key words” as reoccurring themes when conducting this study. While all of those “key words” relate closely with the study, this researcher did not lead participants and used open ended
questions to provoke thought and personal interpretations. This study was closely related to the
literature review and helped to fill the gap in literature related to the topic of associate
engagement and the impact that it has on the profitability of an organization. This study will add
to the existing literature that was reviewed on the topic and provide additional clarity on the
perceptions of the customer.

The Problem

The Problem to be addressed is the conflict between the level of associate engagement
that is expected and level of associate engagement that is being provided. It is important that
organizations understand that the lower levels of associate engagement hurt the organizations’
sustainability; they impact customer satisfaction, and they determine how the customer views
their shopping experience. Lower level of associate engagement creates a shopping experience
that does not meet the expectations of the customer and hurts future revenue (Myrden &
Kelloway, 2015). This study looked specifically at Walmart as a case study and addressed how
the low level of associate engagement and customer dissatisfaction can result in a loss of
revenue.

This qualitative case study findings suggest that the perceptions of customers and
associates are the same as the problem in that levels of associate engagement were a major factor
in creating customer satisfaction. Customers want to interact with associates while in the store as
it provides a sense that they are valued. When associates ignore or avoid a customer the
perception is that they do not care or do not want to help. Customers said that when an associate
seemed disengaged it made them want to find another store to go to and sometimes, they would
leave without making a purchase. Associates acknowledged that their engagement often made a
difference and how much they interact also has an impact. This study was able to successfully address the problem that it was trying to research.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how the levels of associate engagement factor into customer satisfaction and determine the customer’s shopping experience. The research revealed six main themes in the data that was analyzed: shopping experience, customer, attitude, interaction, impact, and service. The interviews and surveys in this study showed that levels of engagement and customer perception were an important factor for determining a positive shopping experience. Participants shared a first-hand account of their perceptions from either a customer or associate point of view. A step toward improving customer perceptions of the shopping experience is to focus on associate engagement, customer satisfaction and providing an exceptional customer shopping experience. Learning to set a higher standard and creating a competitive advantage is what will create sustainability. Increasing engagement levels of all associates regardless of role within the organization will assist in increased revenue and profitability for Walmart.

Applications to Professional Practice

Participants of this case study articulated the importance of the levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction as they relate to the shopping experience. They indicated that there was a direct impact between levels of associate engagement and whether or not the customer shopping experience was positive. The existing literature also establishes a relationship between the variables: level of engagement, customer satisfaction, the customer shopping experience, and increased revenue which is supported by the findings through this case study. Interview participants were able articulate more in detail the correlation of the lack of
engagement and dissatisfaction with the shopping experience. Engagement is a crucial driver of customer satisfaction, a positive shopping experience and increased revenue (Henning-Thurau & Thurau, 2003).

**Improving General Business Practice**

An analysis of the survey and interview responses concludes that concerns with the levels of engagement and the impact on the customer’s shopping experience were valid. Higher levels of engagement positively correlated with a positive shopping experience (Ainsworth & Foster, 2017). The findings of this study further indicates that higher levels of engagement could increase revenue for customer service oriented organizations such as Walmart. This study is supported by existing literature that found evidence that a positive, upbeat attitude from a manager can be contagious and create an environment where an associate experiences job satisfaction while creating a customer perception of the associate being engaged, this leads to an enjoyable shopping experience (Tangirala et al., 2007).

The measurement of success will be increased profitability and sustainability for the organization (Xu & Wang, 2020). Interview and survey participants in the case study communicated concerns about the level of engagement among associates and managers direct toward customers and the organization as well. Customer perception of disengaged and uninterested associates was a common problem articulated through the surveys and interviews. According to Hurst (2014) customers have different perceptions of what they deserve, and this is a factor that can determine the outcome of the shopping experience. In order to more closely align with the customer perception and focus on driving levels of engagement, organizations must address the problem and create a long term solution (Clarke et al., 2017).
Gaining associate commitment to the organizational values and goals will be crucial to resolving the problem permanently. It needs to be an organizational priority to improve associate morale and create an environment that will be inviting to the customer (Sharma & Stafford, 2000). When associates perceive managers as being engaged and they feel they are valued then they buy in to the organizations goals and are more receptive and engaged with customers driving the customer service aspect creating sustainability (Masterson, 2001). Associates’ decisions and reactions are motivated by their attitude and environment, they exhibit an increase frustration and anger when they are dissatisfied with the organization it will be up to the managers to change this perception and drive the associate engagement levels (Charni et al., 2019).

Developing a training plan that addresses all issues that are relative to levels of engagement and that is continuously evolving to meet the desires of the customer will be crucial if the organization hopes to be successful and maintain sustainability in these times of uncertainty. According to Roozen and Katidis (2019), customers place a higher value on the shopping experience than the quality of what they are purchasing, this lends credence to the idea that the levels of engagement will impact the sustainability and competitive advantage of an organization much quicker than a poorly created product. Menguc et al. (2017) adds to the idea with the thought that associate engagement is a driver in customer loyalty and return visits which results in increased revenue and sustainability. In these times of uncertainty organizations need to use every advantage they have to set themselves apart from their competitors and they compete for their place in the industry and look to create a long-term relationship with their customer base. If organizations hope to accomplish this goal, they must start with creating customer satisfaction through the shopping experience and value as perceived by the customer
(Roozen & Katidis, 2019). Simply providing a product or service will not be enough going forward as customers now have several avenues to shop and buy products and services, they either want or need. This is not isolated to brick-and-mortar shopping for organizations such as Walmart because they also have an online platform that they must be able to manage and provide exceptional service for at all times. Associates will need to be trained on levels of engagement in this area as well. Customers are looking for a seamless process when it comes to dealing with returns or purchases made online (Picot-Coupey et al., 2016). It will be up to the store associates to provide this service, as they are the only “face” the customer will be able to relate to the purchase. Additional training should center around situations that could be encountered to better equip the associate to provide the level of engagement that is expected by the customer.

**Potential Application Strategies**

This case study focused on customer services behaviors and their impact on the customer’s shopping experience. Understanding the levels of engagement that are required to create customer satisfaction leading to a positive shopping experience, which impacts the future revenue, takes exploring many factors. The findings of this study could help organizations that are faced with this problem. This researcher recommends that organizational leaders use this case study’s findings to look at their organizational approach to associate engagement and customer satisfaction as it relates to the customer’s perception of the shopping experience. Retail organizations should consider these findings to help develop behaviors that support changes in expectations of levels of engagement and customer service oriented associate behaviors.

This research study can be translated into information for other retailers that are facing the same issues as Walmart and look to develop a global learning plan centered around the customer experience and the enhancement of associate engagement from associates at all every
level of the organization. Organizations can train associates through a situational leadership style and develop scenario-based training to give associates the idea of several potential situations that they could encounter. Organizations can leverage the findings of this research to avoid similar mistakes. By developing a plan to address the concerns that were voiced by associates and customers by creating an anonymous survey. The survey that solicits further information to gain an additional insight into the issues as seen through the eyes of the customer and the associate. By giving the associates a voice, the organization will accomplish two tasks; (a) they will allow the associate to be heard and give them the sense of being valued, and (b) they will gain insight from a different perspective. Sometimes managers or decision makers are too far removed from daily operations to see the total picture and what works in theory is not practical and does not work in the true environment for which it was designed. The survey from a customer perspective allows them to voice concerns or comments and see the changes being made based on the feedback provided giving them a sense that they too are being heard and matter to the organization. The organization could create a “your voice board” that let’s associates and customers know that the organization is taking concerns seriously and responding in a timely manner to address each concern/comment. Obviously, there would be limits to what could be posted but this would go a long way to show an attempt to fix issues that are discovered.

The findings of this case study impact associates and customers in the retail environment. As associates identify the need to develop specific engagement levels, it will become evident that there will be a tremendous impact on sustainability and creating a competitive advantage. Organizational leaders should consider the development associates in the area of engagement and customer satisfaction. Current literature has found that higher levels of engagement serve to build loyalty from customers and is a driving factor increasing revenue through increased
spending and return visits. It is recommended that organizations take time to listen to the voice of the customers and current associate base. Organizations should encourage communication from associate engagement surveys and direct interviews with both customers and associates. Organizations should develop associate engagement programs when looking to make a positively impact the customer shopping experience. In addition, the findings of this study can assist other organizations that are customer service oriented in dealing with the problem of levels of engagement, customer satisfaction, and increasing profitability through future customer visits. In order to validate these findings, Walmart and other retail establishments can use academic research journals and existing literature.

Summary

The finding of this doctoral research study addressed the impact that the levels of engagement have on the customers shopping experience through dissatisfaction of one reason or another. The literature that was reviewed further confirmed that levels of engagement are crucial to the success and sustainability of the organization. There will need to be additional training in several areas to change behaviors and change thought processes to improve the overall customer shopping experience and to increase the levels of engagement by all associates within the organization. By creating a sense of value and importance for the associates the organization with get a higher rate of buy in and change the culture in the organization. This will in turn create a more inviting environment for the customer and create a positive shopping experience, which will translate to increased revenue through returned visits and increased spending.

Recommendations for Further Study

An examination of the literature suggests there is a gap relating to levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the impact on the customer’s shopping experience. This
study used Walmart as a focus of a qualitative case study and utilized associates and customers to gather data regarding the problem. Future studies could focus on customer service oriented engagement behaviors. In addition, this study was limited to a single retail establishment which was Walmart. Further research could be conducted with other retail and service oriented companies to explore additional aspects of the connection between levels of associate engagement, customer satisfaction, the customer shopping experience, and increased revenue.

Future researchers could continue this study by using a broader case study to address this problem. Such a study would explore additional factors and study look deeper to allow the leaders of organizations in the retail environment to develop a training plan for an optimal solution to determining which leadership behaviors can impact employee retention. Additional findings arrived at through studies such as these would increase the overall body of information allowing for greater insight to employee retention in the manufacturing sector. Additionally, further studies could be conducted into what other drivers impact the levels of engagement, such as personal and family issues, hardship, mental health, economic issues, and lastly environmental issues. All the factors that play a role in an associate’s attitude could be explored to further explain organizational disconnect. Future researchers could look at the training and development piece of engagement to not only help associates understand the importance but to teach leaders how to train and coach in the moment in a way that is conducive to a positive response and continued growth from associates and managers in the organization.

Reflections

During this study, this researcher had an opportunity to interact with the study participants and participate in a multitude of conversation during one-on-one interviews and discussions surrounding this research. All the interview participants were happy to participate in
the study and genuinely wanted to share their thoughts on the problem being researched. While I was recruiting for survey participants, I encountered numerous associates that wanted to share their thoughts as well; in fact I had to cut the survey off after the fourth day because I got overwhelming number of responses on day 4 within 90 minutes. I learned that were a lot of people that wanted their voices to be heard and wanted their opinion to be shared.

This researcher was surprised by some of the responses that were provided by both associates and customers and discovered that the two groups are more closely aligned than previously thought. The five research questions were crafted in a way that promoted both open ended and closed ended responses by participants and did not lead them towards any personal opinions or biases of this researcher. The themes that emerged were expected and understood. This researcher has direct interaction with associates and managers in customer service oriented roles daily and regularly interacts with customers and associates of all levels.

**Personal and Professional Growth**

Personally, I learned a lot about myself during this process, and I am a stronger researcher, leader, and Christian because of it. There has been a tremendous amount of sacrifice made over the last three years and the amount of time spent away from family and friends has been trying but worth it. I learned that my family sacrificed more than I thought, and they were extremely patient and encouraging as I worked through frustrations and fears. I learned that they believed in me more than I believed in myself. I have always struggled asking for help or soliciting advice from others both personally and professionally, through this process I learned to lean on my resources such as Dr. Heinz, who has been an instrumental part of why I never gave up during this process. I believe that I am a stronger researcher and analytical thinker; I am able
to see the big picture instead of focusing on a specific issue. I have become more global personally and professionally.

I started this research study with the idea that all customers would share my thought process when it came to the customer shopping experience. What I have learned through this process is that while a level of engagement from associates is expected to some degree, not all customers require a high level of engagement to be satisfied and a simple nod or hello as acknowledgement may be sufficient. I also learned that personal struggles or issues have a more profound impact on an associate’s performance than I had previously thought. Not all people are able to separate business from personal life as easily as others and sometimes it takes interacting with the associates to see that they might need additional encouragement or engagement from management.

My experiences have led me to a deep understanding of how the customer perceives what they see as value added and a positive experience. As this study progressed, I saw how different perspectives shaped the way the customer experience is addressed. Retail outlets of varying sizes were impacted and influenced by the customers desires and needs. As different factors continue to occur within the industry the leadership teams and their associates must look for ways to continue to drive focus on the customer factor and tailoring the experience will be a continued evolution of change. In order for an organization to remain sustainable they will have to continue to be willing to change as fast as the environment.

I believe that this study has given me a better professional insight to the way that retailers must ask questions and dig into the wants of their customer base. As society continues to work through challenges such as Covid-19, global leaders will need to find creative ways to meet the basic needs of customers while also making them feel safe, welcomed, and valued. For me this
has helped me to see that we will be involved in a revolving door of change and what works for one customer may not meet the needs of another. I will have to learn to tailor my training of my associates to suit their learning style and I will have to motivate them according to their personal drivers. There is really no global driver other than a paycheck but that is expected as payment for working. If I want to get the associates more engaged, I am going to have to meet them halfway and show them they are valued in order for them to desire to engage with customers in a positive way. I believe this will be possible only through increased engagement on all levels. Managers must engage positively with associates and they must also engage positively with customers. If we as leaders have open dialogue around expectations and also around the organization’s core values with associates and ask for their input, we will have a bigger buy in and more engaged associates that want to be a part and are proud to be a part of the organization.

**Biblical Perspective**

There have been many opportunities during this case study to include Biblical principles and their impact on business practice, specifically those related to engagement, customer satisfaction and the shopping experience. In reflection, this researcher looked closely at Biblical principles as related to the problem being studied. Associates at all levels in an organization have an impact on those that they serve. This impact can be positive or negative depending on the interaction and level of engagement. “Your daily work is ultimately an act of worship to the God who called and equipped you to do it- no matter what kind of work it is” (Keller & Alsdorf, 2012, p. 71). An effort to be kind and serve can go a long way at creating a positive experience. “Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them, this is the rule I lay down in all the churches” (1 Corinthians 7:17, NKJV).
Associates want to feel valued and as if they are a part of the organization. The more associates are included in the decision making process and the more they feel that their voice matters the more engaged they will become. “And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them” (Luke 6:31, NKJV). Many associates during this study voiced opinions about not feeling that they mattered or where being heard, some even spoke about being negatively challenged by leaders and they were dissatisfied with their job which led to the lower levels of engagement. When associates understand the expectations, the value they add and the role they play they are naturally happier and more willing to promote the core values and engage with customers positively. Keller and Alsdorf (2012) say, “God has not left us alone to discover how or why we are to cultivate his creation; instead, he gives us a clear purpose for our work and faithfully calls us into it” (p. 63). This is no different in the worldview, as leaders giving clear direction and providing the understanding of “why” we do things gives a clearer picture and purpose to the associates.

The impact that levels of associate engagement play in creating a positive shopping experience is crucial and also is a factor on what the customer communications to others the customers perspective on being valued, welcomed, and having a positive shopping experience is easily communicated through the use of social media platforms and through this method can reach a vast audience almost instantly. The customer is what drives the sustainability of the organization and will impact future revenue based on return visits and increased spending on each visit. When a customer communicates a negative experience, it shapes the way others may view the organization and it can be harmful to the repetition and profitability through lost sales. An organization would like to think that all opinions and experience shared should be positive, and are often discouraged by negative feedback, especially in a situation involving an isolated
incident. The customer feels they are saving others from the same type of experience. Ephesians 4:29 (NKJV) tells us “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.” When a customer provides negative feedback, they do not feel that they are being harmful and usually provide information without malicious intent, they are more so looking to help others avoid issues before they start.

If we work according to God’s plan, we will be successful at serving others and meeting their expectations. We were all designed to work in his image and According to Keller and Alsdorf (2012) in the beginning work was a part of what was considered paradise, however, gradually it became what humans felt as a necessary evil. Working for the joy of it got lost along the way and God’s vision was blurred as humans made work a task instead of a joy. It is our responsibility to get back to his plan and help associates see the joy in serving others not just as a part of daily routine at work but as a facet of life. In Isaiah 48:17-18 (NKJV) it says, “Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, The Holy One of Israel:

I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you by the way you should go. Oh, that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea.

This demonstrates that by working according to how God designed us, it would be effortless to create a positive shopping experience and provide high levels of engagement to each customer.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The finding of this doctoral research study addressed the gap in the current body of literature regarding the how that the levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction impact the customer’s shopping experience which impacts future revenue for the retail
establishment. Prior studies completed on similar topics were focused on the customer service oriented organizations. The consensus from the participants is that higher levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction will determine the outcome of the customer’s shopping experience which will impact the future profitability through returned visits.
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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

December 8, 2020

Dear Walmart Associate or Walmart Customer,

As a graduate student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to determine the impact that levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction have on the customer’s shopping experience at Walmart, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are a Walmart associate or a Walmart customer and are willing to participate, you will be asked several questions pertaining to associate engagement, customer satisfaction and the shopping experience while at Walmart during the interview. Once the interview has concluded I will give you the opportunity to review your responses and make any necessary changes. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your name and other identifying information will be collected as part of your participation, but this information will remain confidential.

If you are interested in participating, or have further questions, please email me at dhufford@liberty.edu by September 1, 2020. Once the study begins, I will contact you directly to set up a convenient time for an interview. A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to the interview.

Sincerely,

Deborah Hufford

Doctoral Candidate
Appendix B

Consent for Survey participants

**Title of the Project:** Associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the impact on the shopping experience.

**Principal Investigator:** Deborah Hufford, Liberty University, School of Business

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a Walmart customer, who shops in the store, or a Walmart associate. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</td>
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Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What is the study about and why is it being done?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of the study is to provide a better understanding of the impact customer service and associate engagement has on a customer’s shopping experience, ultimately impacting the revenue for Walmart.</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>What will happen if you take part in this study?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Complete an anonymous online survey. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.</td>
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<th><strong>How could you or others benefit from this study?</strong></th>
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<td>Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.</td>
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<th><strong>What risks might you experience from being in this study?</strong></th>
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<td>The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>How will personal information be protected?</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Participant responses will be anonymous.
• Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard copies will be locked in a safe in the researcher’s home office and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hard copy recorded will be shredded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is study participation voluntary?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with Liberty University. You are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time, prior to submitting the survey, without affecting these relationships.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you choose to withdraw from the study, please exit the survey and close your Internet browser. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The researcher conducting this study is Deborah Hufford. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [email protected] or [email protected]. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Arthur Heinz, at [email protected].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, [Institutional Review Board Address] or email at [IRB Email].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your Consent</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before agreeing to part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Consent for Interview Participants

Title of the Project: Associate engagement, customer satisfaction, and the impact on the shopping experience.
Principal Investigator: Deborah Hufford, Liberty University, School of Business

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a Walmart customer, who shops in the store, or a Walmart associate. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the study about and why is it being done?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The purpose of the study is to understand how levels of associate engagement and customer satisfaction impact the customer’s shopping experience at Walmart.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will happen if you take part in this study?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
  1. Take part in an interview that will take approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded. |
  2. Review your interview transcript at a later date to ensure accuracy of transcribed data. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How could you or others benefit from this study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What risks might you experience from being in this study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.</td>
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<th>How will personal information be protected?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
  - Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. |
  - Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and hard copies will be locked in a safe in the researcher’s home office. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hard copy records will be shredded. |
• Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

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<td>Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationships with Liberty University. You are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting these relationships.</td>
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<th>What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<th>Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?</th>
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<td>By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_________  _____________
Printed Subject Name  Signature & Date
Appendix D

Interview Guide for associate engagement and customer satisfaction Survey for Walmart Customers

1. What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?
   a. As a Walmart customer how do you feel when you are not acknowledged by an associate that you encounter while shopping in the store?
   b. Does the Walmart associate you interact with seem like they are willing to help, or do you get the feeling that they do not want to assist you?
   c. If you do interact with an associate and are asking for assistance, how often is the associate helpful?
   d. On average how many times have you asked a Walmart associate for assistance and they gave you the wrong information?
      i. Less than half the time
      ii. Half the time
      iii. More than half the time
      iv. All the time

2. As a customer of Walmart what are the perceptions as they relate to your shopping experiences when you encounter associates who are not engaged or do not seem happy with their job?
   a. Have you ever felt like you were bothering an associate when you asked a question?
   b. How often do you get the feeling that an associate does not want to be at work and is trying to avoid acknowledging you?
THE EFFECTS OF ASSOCIATE ENGAGEMENT

i. Less than half the time

ii. Half the time

iii. More than half the time

iv. All the time

3. What is the impact on your shopping experience when it appears that an associate has recently had a negative interaction with their manager and then attempts to engage with you?
   a. Have you ever witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?
   b. How many of the associates who work for Walmart, do you think are dissatisfied with their job? And why?

4. How do you, as the customer feel about your shopping experience when you have had a chance to engage in interaction with associates and managers at Walmart?
   a. Does interacting with associates change your shopping experience?
   b. Does a positive, upbeat attitude and willingness to help make the difference when you are shopping?
   c. Does an associate who is knowledgeable and engaged make a difference over one that may not know answers to your questions?

Is there anything more you would like to add?
Appendix E

Interview Guide for associate engagement and customer satisfaction for Walmart

Associates

1. What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?
   a. As a Walmart associate do you think your level of engagement is an important factor in a customer being satisfied and having a enjoyable shopping experience.
   b. When you interact with a customer that is asking for assistance, is do you think you make an impact?
   c. On average how many times has a customer asked you for assistance and you could not give accurate information?
      i. Less than half the time
      ii. Half the time
      iii. More than half the time
      iv. All the time

2. As an associate of Walmart what are your perceptions as they relate to the shopping experiences of customers who are seeking assistance or do not seem to know what they are looking for?
   a. As a Walmart associate how do you think you impact the shopping experience of your customer from a customer satisfaction perspective if you are upset or agitated at work?
   b. Have you ever felt like a customer was bothering you when they approach you with questions?
c. How often do you think you give the perception that you do not want to be at work and are trying to avoid acknowledging customers?
   i. Less than half the time
   ii. Half the time
   iii. More than half the time
   iv. All the time

d. As an associate of Walmart do you think your attitude towards your job can impact the customers that are shopping in your store?

3. When you have recently had a negative interaction with your manager, and you attempt to engage with a customer do you think there is a negative impact?
   a. As an associate how do you think that your mood impacts your interactions?
   b. As an associate how do you overcome being upset in order to make sure the customer is satisfied?
   c. Have you ever witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?
   d. How many associates who work for Walmart do you think are dissatisfied with their job? And why?

4. As an associate do you think that your knowledge level of your job and engagement your engagement level with customers matters?

Is there anything more you would like to add?
Appendix F

Online Survey for Walmart Customers

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
   d. Yes
   e. No

2. Are you a current customer of Walmart and shop in Walmart stores?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that
   the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?
   a. A high level
   b. Moderately high level
   c. Normal level
   d. Low level

4. As a Walmart customer, do you think the level of engagement from an associate is an
   important factor in being satisfied and having an enjoyable shopping experience?

5. As a Walmart customer, how do you feel when you are not acknowledged by an associate
   you encounter while shopping in the store?
   a. Frustrated
   b. Angry
c. Discouraged

d. There is no impact

6. Does the Walmart associate you interact with seem like they are willing to help, or do you get the feeling that they do not want to assist you? (Please explain)

7. If you do interact with an associate and are asking for assistance, how often is the associate helpful?
   a. Always
   b. Almost always
   c. Sometimes
   d. Seldom
   e. Never

8. On average, how many times have you asked a Walmart associate for assistance and they gave you the wrong information?
   a. Less than half the time
   b. Half the time
   c. More than half the time
   d. All the time
9. As a customer of Walmart, what are the perceptions as they relate to your shopping experiences when you encounter associates who are who are not engaged or do not seem happy with their job? (Please explain)

10. How often have you felt like you were bothering an associate when you asked a question?
   - a. Less than half the time
   - b. Half the time
   - c. More than half the time
   - d. All the time

11. How often do you get the feeling that an associate does not want to be at work and is trying to avoid acknowledging you?
   - a. Less than half the time
   - b. Half the time
   - c. More than half the time
   - d. All the time

12. What is the impact on your shopping experience when it appears that an associate has recently had a negative interaction with their manager and then attempts to engage with you? (Please explain)
13. How many times have you witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?

   a. More than 10 times
   b. 7-9 times
   c. 4-6 times
   d. 1-3 times
   e. Never

14. How many of the associates who work for Walmart do you think are dissatisfied with their job? And why?

15. How do you, as the customer, feel about your shopping experience when you have had a chance to engage in interaction with associates and managers at Walmart?

16. Do you think that interacting with associates changes your shopping experience? Why or why not? (Please explain)
17. Does a positive, upbeat attitude and willingness to help make the difference when you are shopping? Why or Why not? (Please explain)

18. Do you think that an associate who is knowledgeable and engaged make a difference over one that may not know answers to your questions? (Please explain)

19. What is your age group?
   a. 18-24
   b. 25-30
   c. 31-35
   d. 36-40
   e. 41-45
   f. 46-50
   g. Over 50
   h. Prefer not to answer

20. What is your gender?
   a. Male
b. Female

c. Prefer not to answer

Is there anything more you would like to add?
Appendix G

Online Survey for Walmart Associates

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
   f. Yes
   g. No

2. Are you a current Employee of Walmart?
   a. Yes
   b. No

3. What level of engagement is required from Walmart associates for customers to feel that
   the associates made a difference in their shopping experience?
   a. A high level
   b. Moderately high level
   c. Normal level
   d. Low level

4. As a Walmart associate, do you think your level of engagement is an important factor in a
   customer being satisfied and having an enjoyable shopping experience??

5. How do you think a customer feels when you do not acknowledge them while they are
   shopping in the store?
   a. Frustrated
   b. Angry
c. Discouraged

d. There is no impact

6. When you interact with a customer, do you think you give them the perception that you are willing to help, or do you give them the feeling that you do not want to assist them?

(Please explain)

7. If you do interact with a customer and they ask for assistance, how often are you helpful?

a. Always

b. Almost always

c. Sometimes

d. Seldom

e. Never

8. On average how many times has someone asked you for assistance and you gave the wrong information?

a. Less than half the time

b. Half the time

c. More than half the time

d. All the time

9. As a Walmart associate, do you think you impact the shopping experience of your customer from a customer satisfaction perspective if you are upset or agitated at work?
10. How often do you think that a customer felt like they were bothering you when they asked a question?
   a. Less than half the time
   b. Half the time
   c. More than half the time
   d. All the time

11. How often do you feel like you do not want to be at work and try to avoid acknowledging customers?
   a. Less than half the time
   b. Half the time
   c. More than half the time
   d. All the time

12. As an associate of Walmart, do you think your attitude towards your job can impact the customers that are shopping in your store?

13. As an associate how do you think that your mood impacts your interactions?
   a. It has a great impact
   b. It impacts it somewhat
   c. There is little impact
   d. There is no impact
14. As an associate, how do you overcome being upset in order to make sure the customer is satisfied?

15. How many times have you witnessed a negative interaction between a manager and an associate that appeared to have upset the associate?
   a. More than 10 times
   b. 7-9 times
   c. 4-6 times
   d. 1-3 times
   e. Never

16. How many associates who work for Walmart do you think are dissatisfied with their job? And why?

17. Do you think a positive, upbeat attitude and willingness to help make the difference when you are assisting a customer? Why or Why not? (Please explain)

18. As an associate do you think that your knowledge level and engagement matters? (Please explain) Please explain.
19. What is your age group?
   a. 18-24
   b. 25-30
   c. 31-35
   d. 36-40
   e. 41-45
   f. 46-50
   g. Over 50
   h. Prefer not to answer

20. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Prefer not to answer

Is there anything more you would like to add?
Appendix H

Social Media Recruitment

Are you a Walmart customer or a Walmart associate? Would you like to participate in a research study about associate engagement and customer satisfaction, and its impact on the customer’s shopping experience?

For more information please contact me at dhufford@liberty.edu.

[Removed to comply with copyright]