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Social Media Marketing Strategies to Gain and Retain Customers

Brandy A. McNeil
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College of Management and Technology

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Brandy McNeil

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Walden University
2021

Abstract

Social Media Marketing Strategies to Gain and Retain Customers

by

Brandy McNeil

MS, Walden University, 2011

BS, Hunter College, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2021

Abstract

The inability of small business owners to gain and retain customers adversely impacts a company's customer base. Small business owners who fail to attract and retain a customer base risk financial failure. Grounded in Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore social media strategies small business owners use to gain and retain customers. Participants were five small business owners in the New York City area who successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, sales reports, social media, and public social media posts. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Five themes emerged: use of popular social media platforms, consistency and timing of posts, quality of content, maintaining relationships through engagement, and gaining technical knowledge. Key recommendations for small business owners are to invest in social media marketing training and create a scheduling calendar for content and engagement with customers. The implications for positive social change include increased economic prosperity for citizens and local organizations within communities through partnerships, philanthropic efforts, and increased tax revenues.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my parents who helped make me the person I am today. My drive and dedication to finish whatever I start is what has truly helped me during this journey. I am who I am because of you guys and I will never forget it.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge all of those who sacrificed with me during my completion of my doctoral study and those that pushed and believed in me to accomplish this journey when I thought I could not. Most importantly, I want to thank my son, Brandon, who helped me by ensuring that he stayed focused and continued to get good grades in school while I was in school myself. Your ability to learn to be self-sufficient helped me to be able to focus on my studies. Thank you for always being there for me and holding me down during all the trials and tribulations of life that happened while completing this study. You helped me when I struggled to get through certain portions of this study and encouraged me along the way. I will forever appreciate that. I love you.

Lastly, I would like to thank myself. I have done the work and put in the time and I am proud to accomplish something so prestigious. I was able to do this doctorate while dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic, close family members' deaths, working a full-time job, a part-time job, being on two national boards, being a mother, a fur mom, the caretaker of my disabled mom, and running three businesses. My time was limited but I did not give up and throw in the towel. I pushed through and I am proud of myself.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

As of 2016, there were 28.8 million small businesses in the United States (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2016). Within 5 years, approximately 50% of US small businesses closed due to insufficient or inadequate marketing (Cole et al., 2017). Even though metrics exist to measure impact, many small business owners are skeptical of social media as a marketing tool and are not convinced it will benefit their business (Cole et al., 2017). Social media, which has shown dramatic growth over the past few years, is especially important for small businesses because it can be used to connect with customers (Jones et al., 2015). With rising costs of advertising, social media has become the primary channel for small business owners to reach clients and consumers (Webb & Roberts, 2016).

Small business owners are increasingly using social media to reach current customers and attract new ones (Ur Rahman et al., 2020). Facebook is one of the most common platforms used by small business owners to reach both current and potential customers (Roy et al., 2014). Engaging customers on Facebook has also been shown to lead to more frequent shopping visits and increased purchases (Achen, 2017). Social media sites provide small business owners opportunities to overcome limitations involving time and financial resources, allowing them to reach out to customers in a cost-effective manner (Jones et al., 2015). However, many small business owners lack awareness of the value of social media or knowledge of effective ways to use it as a

marketing tool. Cesaroni and Consoli (2015) said 31.8% of micro-enterprises with less than 10 employees use social media.

Problem Statement

Small businesses that fail to use social media marketing strategies may lose a large percentage of their customer base due to consumers spending more time on their smartphones and social media (Cole et al., 2017). Toker et al. (2016) found that in five industries in the United States, small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who successfully integrated social media into their marketing strategy had a 400% increase in website traffic and 70% decrease in marketing expenses. While larger companies have a propensity to use social media, small businesses are far less likely to use emerging technologies than their larger counterparts (He et al., 2017). The general business problem is that some small business owners are unaware or ineffective in their use of social media adoption. The specific business problem is some small business owners lack effective strategies to use social media to gain and retain customers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. The targeted population was comprised of five small business owners of companies with less than 10 employees located in New York City who have successfully used social media strategies to increase and retain their customer base. Park and Campbell (2018) said small businesses' social contributions help to maintain and build healthy communities. As small business owners adopt social media to grow their business,

owners can drive economic prosperity for citizens as well as local organizations within communities through partnerships, philanthropic efforts, and tax revenues, thereby contributing to positive social change.

Nature of the Study

When conducting a research study, there should be methodological coherence between the research method and research design (Saunders et al., 2016). There are three types of methods that are used for studies: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Researchers use quantitative methods to examine relationships among variables, which are then measured and analyzed using a wide range of approaches (Saunders et al., 2016). My study did not require testing hypotheses for examining variables' relationships, and therefore the quantitative methods was not appropriate. In order to conduct a mixed methods approach, quantitative and qualitative data would need to be combined, and I only needed to employ the qualitative method to understand this topic. As such, mixed methods was not appropriate for this study. For this study, a qualitative methodology was appropriate to explore what social media strategies small business owners used to successfully gain and retain customers. The use of the qualitative method can help the researcher identify and understand similarities and differences regarding a phenomenon (Park & Park, 2016). Park and Park (2016) said the use of a qualitative method are best used for discovery.

The most appropriate design for this study is a multicase research design. Interviews and focus groups are designed to investigate participants and their perceptions (Snelson, 2017). Small business owners typically have a perception of social media that

causes them not to use tools (Cole et al., 2017). Ridder (2017) noted multiple cases help to further explore theories via contrasts and similarities to determine what information is valuable or not among the various cases. As the researcher, I identified common and divergent strategies that small business owners use through a multicase research design. Researchers use ethnographic studies to find support in collecting and analyzing subjective data capable of providing an understanding of groups' cultures (Cardoso et al., 2017). My study was not focused on the topic of culture, beliefs, or values of owners, so using an ethnographic study would not have been suitable. Researchers use phenomenology and narrative studies to help them focus on the personal meaning of human experiences and their life-centric stories (Strong et al., 2018). My study was focused on strategies. Therefore, phenomenological and narrative designs were not appropriate for my study.

Research Question

What social media strategies have small business owners used to successfully gain and retain customers?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to successfully use social media to gain and retain customers?

2. How many years have you been using social media to gain and retain customers, and what factors or conditions made you start?

3. What are the social media platforms that you use, and what strategies do you use for each one?

4. What measurement strategies do you use to see how many customers you have gained and/or retained?

5. What key challenges did your organization face for implementing each social media platform you use?

6. How did your organization address the key challenges to implementing its strategies for gaining and retaining customers?

7. How do you keep your customers engaged using social media marketing strategies?

8. How do you determine which social media marketing strategies have been most effective for your organization?

9. What other information regarding your organization's social media strategies would you like to share with me?

Conceptual Framework

Given the successful influence of social media on business practices, several theories have been suggested as appropriate for the study of social media adoption by business organizations. The conceptual framework for this study is Rogers' adoption theory. Rogers' adoption theory is also known as the diffusion of innovation theory (DOI). It has four characteristics: innovation, communication channel, time, and social system. The DOI theory is meant to help explain the process and speed by which adoption of new technology occurs (Amaro & Duarte, 2015). Adopter categories for innovation are (a) innovators, (b) early adopters, (c), early majority, (d) late majority, and (e) laggards (Rogers, 2003). The DOI framework was applied to my study because it was useful in terms of facilitating my understanding of how small business owners focused on

developing and implementing social media marketing strategies to gain and retain customers.

Operational Definitions

This section includes terms that may be easily confused, and these definitions provide clarity for readers.

Digital Economy: Digital online technologies that engage actively with e-commerce, e-business, social-CRM, and e-marketing (Mazzarol, 2015).

Micro-Enterprises: Small businesses with less than 10 employees (Cesaroni & Consoli, 2015).

SMEs: Firms with fewer than 250 employees (Ahmad et al., 2018).

Social Media: Online sites that allow people to be social such as Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, and LinkedIn (Webb & Roberts, 2016).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are conditions that are taken for granted (Korrapti, 2016). I assumed research participants in the New York City area understood the questions I asked them, and their responses were truthful. I also assumed that interview questions I had gathered were adequate for participants to express how they successfully used social media strategies.

Limitations

In research, factors that affect outcomes but are outside of the researcher's control are called limitations (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A limitation of this study beyond

my control was the Covid-19 pandemic that shut down New York City at the time in which I was to conduct my face-to-face interviews. Therefore, all interviews were conducted via Zoom. Limited geographic and population size prohibits valuable statistical data.

Delimitations

My study included five small business owners who were 18 years or older whose business had less than 10 employees in the New York City area and have been in business for at least 5 years or more. The industries of these small businesses were an online clothing line, retail clothing store, poling exercise, event planning and spa. In addition, those SMEs had to have successfully used social media marketing strategies to gain and retain customers by using at least one social media platform in which they had seen a consistent increase in sales from new and repeat customers since implementing social media marketing strategies.

<div align="center">

Significance of the Study

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Contribution to Business Practice

Small businesses that fail to adopt social media systems and become actively involved in the digital economy can face becoming marginalized and risk declining growth, website traffic, and decreases in marketing expenses (Mazzarol, 2015). Small business owners and managers require new skillsets to overcome barriers to adopting technology for marketing (Alford & Page, 2015). Small business owners can benefit from using social media marketing strategies to help them grow their businesses. Social media have become a means for small business owners to gain and retain customers, increase

sales, learn what their competitors are doing, and grow (Alford & Page, 2015). Despite optimism by small business owners regarding the outcomes of the usage of social media, the rate of social media adoption in the SME sector has remained low compared to larger companies because small business owners lack knowledge of how to capitalize on and realize technology's benefits (Ahmad et al., 2018). According to Odom et al. (2017), larger companies that adopt innovation early on will influence the adoption a of small to medium sized enterprises. Information in this study can help small companies' leaders understand what effective social media marketing strategies can help their businesses grow and retain customers and profitability.

Implications for Social Change

Findings from this doctoral study can help with local economic growth as well as the social development of local communities. Small businesses tend to help their communities in terms of local employment, local spending in which profits stay within communities, sponsoring local sports teams, and volunteering in support of community events. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2013) said local businesses can help protect environmental resources such as reducing air pollution. Through this study's findings, businesses might gain insight into effective social media strategies that increase sales and thus help to keep small businesses growing, which in turn helps to keep communities in the NYC area thriving.

<div align="center">

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

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The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. I

synthesized this review using peer-reviewed articles, dissertations related to the research question, and seminal books related to the conceptual framework. The literature review was organized starting with my review and synthesis of literature related to Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory. I then provide a critical analysis and synthesis of social media, adoption of social media by small business owners, and social media marketing techniques. To conclude the review, I end with a summary.

I used databases such as ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Complete, Emerald Management Journals, ProQuest Central, and SAGE Premier, which I accessed via the Walden University Library. Additional searches involved Google Scholar for a thorough review of scholarly literature. The search included the following keywords: *social media*, *social media marketing*, *online marketing*, *small business marketing*, *micro-enterprises*, *consumer buying behavior*, *customer engagement*, *brand loyalty*, *competitive advantage*, *customer relationship marketing*, *consumer reviews*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *marketing*, *word-of-mouth*, *electronic word of mouth*, *Web 2.0*, *SMEs*, *adoption theory*, and *diffusion of adoption theory*. This study includes 190 references, of which 132 (80%) were peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles and had a publication date between 2017 and 2021. References include journals, books, and dissertations as well as local, state, and federal government websites and databases. One hundred and thirty-two sources had publication dates between 2017 and 2021 (see Table 1).

Table 1

Literature Source Content

Literature Source Content	Total #	Total Published 2017-2021	Total Published before 2017	% Published 2017-2021
Peer-reviewed journals	184	132	52	80%
Books	5	0	5	0%
Other Sources	1	0	1	0%
Total Sources	190	132	52	

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory

There are a few theories and theoretical frameworks that have been used to explain adoption and use of technology in organizations. The DOI theory is the conceptual framework for this study. The DOI theory is a social change theory that involves understanding adoption processes of new ideas (Beattie et al., 2019). Rogers' diffusion theory has been modified and expanded since it was originally introduced in 1962 but still retains its core.

The DOI theory helps researchers understand the process by which new technologies and ideas can be spread into a social system. Innovation is defined as an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or group (Rogers, 2003). The DOI theory has been shown to be successful in a variety of fields, including marketing. An accurate understanding of consumers' preferences and purchase behavior contributes to the success of DOI for small businesses (Shi et al., 2014).

Diffusion involves innovation that is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system (Dearing & Cox, 2018). Rogers (2003) said the

DOI theory explores how, why, and at what rate adoption of innovation occurs and spreads. Because the adoption of a new innovation does not happen simultaneously by all people, people's attitudes towards innovation affect their rate of adoption (Beattie et al., 2019). Al-Hakim and Lu (2017) said compatibility, complexity, relative advantage, and observability are attributes used to determine innovation adoption.

There are also a series of stages small businesses must consider during the decision to adopt an innovation. Rogers (2003) said stages of adoption innovation consist of *knowledge*, which is when a person is made aware of the innovation, *persuasion*, which is when a person develops a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation, *decision*, which is when a person engages in activities that lead to adopting or rejecting the innovation, *implementation*, which is when a person puts in place the new innovation, and *confirmation*, which is when a person wants reinforcement about their decision, so they can decide whether to continue or discontinue use of the innovation.

Rogers (1995) said the speed by which members of a social system adapt an innovation constitutes the level of adoption. The five stages of adoption are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers, 2003). Innovators and early adopters often adopt an innovation due to curiosity and the general propensity to try new things (Dearing, 2009; Mehmood et al., 2016; Raynard, 2017). In addition, Rogers (2003) said there are times when the purchasing power of the consumer is what impedes the adoption of technology. Furthermore, Higueras-Castillo et al. (2020) said early adopters are those that boost the spread of new ideas before they become popular. Contrastingly, laggard adopters want to be certain that innovation does not fail before

they adopt it (Jahanmir & Lages, 2016). Rogers (2003) said lower costs of technology often results in increased adoption rates.

Likewise, to help explain different levels of adoption, one must understand different characteristics they have. The five attributes of the DOI theory consist of (a) relative advantage, (b) compatibility, (c) complexity, (d) trialability, and (e) observability, and determine the ways in which people use an innovation (Rogers, 2003). These characteristics are part of the persuasion phase of the DOI theory and involve assessing individual and behavioral factors within a business (Albualrob & Kang, 2015).

Relative Advantage

Relative advantage is the comparison of one innovation over another, essentially measuring how new is better than old (Mamun, 2018). Relative advantage impacts adoption and influences late adoption stages that determine a small business owner's intention to continue to use an innovation (Puklavec et al., 2018).

Figure 1

Model of Five Stages of the Innovation-Decision Process
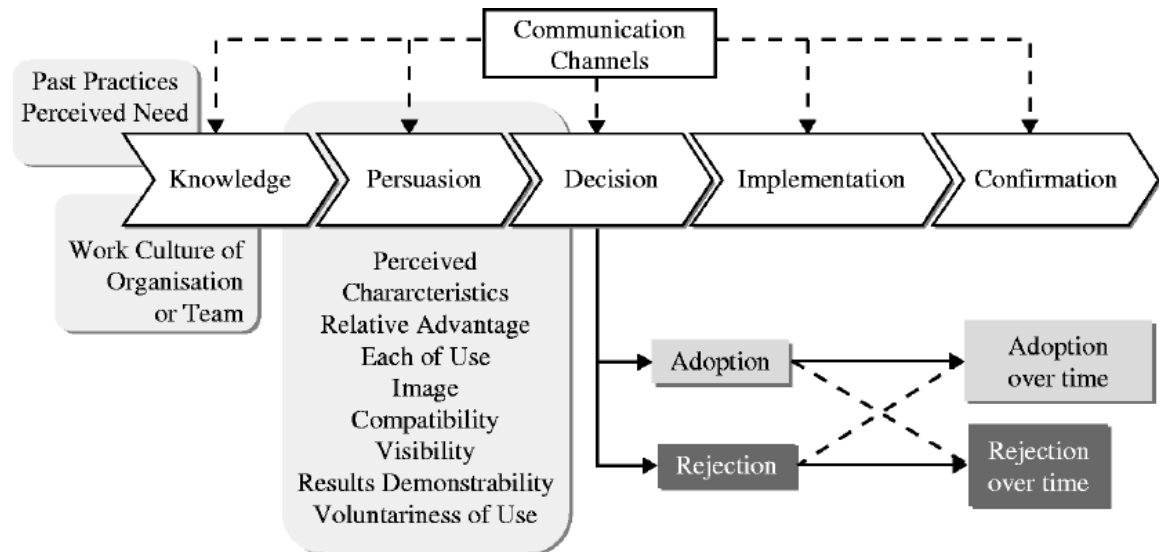
Note. From *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th ed., p. 170), by E. M. Rogers, 2003. Free Press.

Copyright 2003 by Everett Rogers.

Compatibility

Compatibility refers to how easy it is for the user to adopt the new idea into their life. Essentially, the adopted innovation needs to be consistent with norms a business owner is accustomed to (Mammon, 2018). Nehme (2016) said one of the essential attributes of the DOI theory is perceived compatibility, which involves being consistent with existing values, norms, past experiences, and self-perceptions of potential adopters. Therefore, in order to adopt an innovation, the small business owner must value the innovation. According to Desmarchelier and Fang (2016), not only must the innovation meet the needs of the small business owner, it must exceed those needs in order for diffusion to take place.

Complexity

Complexity refers to how difficult it is for the adopter to grasp an innovation (Rogers, 2003). In the same way, if the innovation is too complex, the more difficult it will be for the adopter to incorporate (Hua & Haughton, 2009). To mitigate the issue of complexity, small business owners learn how innovation works so they can avoid missing potential cost savings due to complexity.

Trialability

Trialability is the concept of trying out an innovation for a limited time (Rogers, 2003). It provides the adopter an opportunity to test the innovation without making a commitment. Likewise, trialability involves feedback needed to reduce the uncertainty of adoption (Mamun, 2018). The purpose is to allow people to use the product and see its value, ease of use, and ease of mind in terms of quality or innovation. As small business owners assume financial risks due to their size, it is important that they reduce risks (Turner & Endres, 2017). Small business owners can take advantage of trialability to determine if a particular social media tool helps them gain any value prior to making a financial commitment.

Observability

Observability is when the adopter can realize the benefits of using innovation, which then has a positive effect on adoption (Duckworth, 2014). Ali et al. (2019) said there was a significant positive relationship between observability and customer adoption because if people can observe a service or product that meets their needs then it positively effects their adoption. Zhang et al. (2015) said in order for technological

innovation to lead to adoption and usage, there must be effective communication, a perceived value of the technology, ease of use, and a social system to make it possible. Olufemi (2019) states resources and social support are also needed for the adoption of innovation. Ritz et al. (2019) said perceived ease of use and usefulness had a positive effect on small business owners' intentions to use social media.

The modernization of online social networking platforms has created new methods for peers to not only share information but diffuse it faster (Mehmood et al., 2016). A part of the diffusion process involves reducing uncertainty by searching for judgments of trusted and respected individuals which is a direct correlation to the diffusion process used by SME's when they hire influencers to provide their opinions about a product or service on social networking platforms (Dearing, 2009). Caiazza and Volpe (2017) said relationships improve the processing capacity of information in which data and knowledge can effectively be transferred. It is this flow of knowledge that happens between peers on online social networking platforms.

Alternative Technology Adoption Theories

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

There are other technology adoption theories, such as the TAM, which focuses on the motivation of users of new technologies. Similar to the DOI theory, the TAM involves ease of use of technology and how useful it is to determine one's intentions to adopt the innovation (Davis, 1989). The TAM has been further developed to what is called TAM 2 and is similar in theory to the perceived characteristics of observability, trialability and compatibility in the DOI theory (Morris & James, 2017). The DOI theory

can help small business owners understand why they should use social media marketing

strategies to achieve a competitive advantage. In contrast to the TAM, the DOI theory

captures innovation in a way that makes it useful in explaining why users adopt the

innovation or how they make the decision when adopting it (Rogers, 1995). Ritz et al.

(2019) said using the TAM shows that ease of use and usefulness are not the only

motivating factors for small business owners to adopt social media marketing. The do-it-

yourself (DIY) behavior model is another factor motivating small business owners.

Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE) Framework

An additional approach involving adoption of technology innovations is the TOE

framework. Originating in 1990 by Tornatky and Fleischer, the theory involves the

likelihood of innovation and technology adoption. When analyzing the technology

adoption process at the organizational level of a company, TOE is one of the common

frameworks used. The TOE framework combines characteristics of innovations with

internal and external factors to explain the adoption process. Awa et al., (2016), said the

TOE framework has a strong empirical foundation and is more user friendly in terms of

size and industry.

The TOE framework consists of three tenets: technological context,

organizational context, and environmental context (Tornatky & Fleischer, 1990). The

technological context tenet involves technology that is currently used or in the

marketplace which affirms how much a business owner can undertake (Awa et al., 2017).

The organizational context tenet involves characteristics and resources of the business

(Eze et al., 2021). The environmental context tenet involves the structure of the industry and how it impacts innovation and adoption (Tripopsakul, 2018).

Figure 2

TOE Conceptual Model
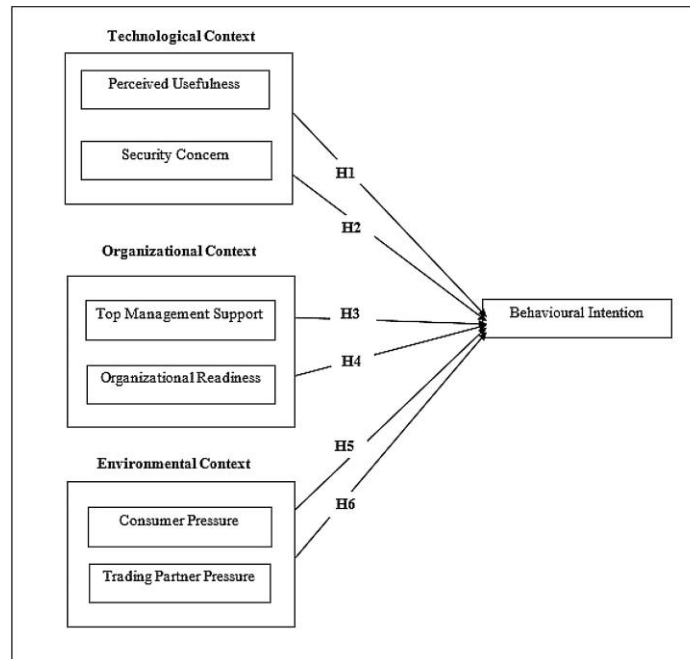
Note. From "Social commerce adoption using TOE framework: An empirical investigation of Saudi Arabian SME's, by S. Abed, 2020, *International Journal of Information Management, 53*, p. 105. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2020.102118 Copyright 2020 by Elsevier.

Similarly, businesses that have teams with groups from different functional areas and are destructured, tend to be the companies that adopt innovation more frequently; likewise, if the industry is growing, businesses in the industry tend to grow with it (Baker, 2011). In the context of environmental influence, during the COVID-19

pandemic, companies who invested in personal protection equipment (PPE) saw a surge in growth.

   Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT) Framework. The UTAUT is based on factors that impact behavioral intention of acceptance and use of a system or technology as well as predictors (Venkatesh et al., 2003). The framework consists of five components that predict behavior intention: performance expectancy (PE), effort expectancy (EE), social influence (SI), facilitating conditions (FC), and voluntariness of use (VU; Puriwat et al., 2021). All these factors help in terms of examining the impact of behavioral intention.

   The UTAUT framework is one that was based on a review of existing literature without any empirical test being done. Diffusion of innovation has been heavily tested in terms of the study of innovation adoption across a range of topics. The TAM and TOE theories focus on technology acceptance; however, they fail to provide insight into social and psychological factors (Awa et al., 2016; Venkatesh & Bala, 2008).

   There are unique reasons that small businesses have a different transition into the adoption of technology vs. large corporations such as limited capabilities in size, amount of capital and income, and few if any experts in a particular field of technology (Olufemi, 2019). Two common barriers to new technology adoption for small business owners is their lack of knowledge in social media marketing strategies and resources to adopt those (Kraus et al., 2019). Social media has the propensity to influence the entire consumer-decision making process (Appel et al., 2019).

Similarly, Rogers (2003) posited the innovation-decision process consists of five stages. The first stage is the knowledge, which is the understanding of how the innovation functions. The second is the persuasion stage in which favorable or unfavorable attitudes are established. The third is the decision stage; at this point, a person is engaging in an activity that will lead to the adoption or rejection of the innovation. Fourth is when an individual puts a new idea into use, which is the implementation stage. Lastly, the confirmation stage takes place when an individual seeks reinforcement of their decision.

Overview of Social Media

In this section, I reviewed the existing literature on social media. In order to understand how social media marketing plays such a huge role for small business owners, it is important to understand where social media has evolved. Before there was Web 2.0, which is often referred to as the social media resurgence, there was Web 1.0, which consisted of skilled website administrators who would create content for the internet and static web pages (Billington & Billington, 2012). However, that one-way communication of business to the consumer would be short-lived with the advent of social media, which is a product of the Web 2.0 era and the introduction of user-generated content.

Social media refer to a set of internet-based applications in which social interactions occur between people by creating and sharing exchanges (Deodato, 2018). According to Stoian (2019), there are 3.5 billion active social media users in the world and highlights the expansion and growing attraction of social media. Similarly, Balan and Rege (2017) state social networking websites are now the primary means of communication for people among all age groups. Social networking is an established

communication vehicle; however, the tools to do so have changed. These tools are the Internet and innovations such as computers, mobile phones, and a router to access the Internet (Isam & Dagdeviren, 2018). Social media has radically changed the way businesses conduct business around the world (Wu, 2020). Similarly, Aalwan et al. (2017) suggested social networking is a platform used by individuals who have similar interests and would like to contact each other, whereas social media is modal to broadcast and influence people.

Some of the largest social media platforms are Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, with Facebook having 2.5 billion users worldwide (Stoian, 2019). Similarly, Balan and Rege (2017) posited Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to be among the most widely used social media platforms. Mack et al. (2017), examined entrepreneur's use of social media applications and found Facebook to be the most popular social media outlet by entrepreneurs. Similarly, He et al. (2014) found that Twitter and Facebook are commonplace for large companies. Supporting these findings, Cavinder et al. (2017), study results show Facebook is the most common social media platform used by businesses with over 75% usage of those businesses surveyed and Instagram and Twitter followed in usage respectively, but on a smaller scale.

Facebook, an online platform started in 2004, allows a small business owner to create a user profile that contains images, videos, and other visual content that can be shared about the business (Basri & Siam, 2017). Facebook is the world's largest social networking site for individuals, businesses, and groups and what helped to propel them forward was offering the platform in many languages as well as adding a host of features

such as likes, news feeds, timelines, and games to name a few (Musonera & Weber, 2018). Similarly, small business owners are able to increase their customer engagement through dialogue and using likes to build and expand their reach and presence on Facebook (Augar & Zeleznikow, 2014). Through the use of Facebook, small businesses' direct value can be obtained in the form of transactions due to new customers and an increase in turnover and organization growth (Kraus et al., 2019). Similarly, Kudeshia et al. (2016) posited likes on Facebook could turn into brand love, which can ultimately result in purchasing activities. Emeksi (2017) examined the results of small businesses using Facebook, and it included finding new customers, developing strong customer relationships, and an increase in profits.

Twitter, which launched in 2006, just four years prior to Instagram and two years after Facebook, has been a social platform that has been diffused into the world as a 140-character limited microblogging website whose use of hashtags (#) created interpersonal communications that were quickly adopted (Isam & Dagdeviren, 2018). Balan and Rege (2017) stated it is vital that small business owners understand strategies in using social media, and Twitter is a good medium for reaching more people. Conversely, Xiong et al., (2018) stated although Twitter is one of the most popular social networking platforms. Regardless of its low-cost as a communication channel, Twitter is still a platform where companies with large market capital benefit more than those with smaller market capitalization. Majumdar and Bose (2019) posited firms that adopt Twitter are valued more by stakeholders' post-adoption. Similar to Facebook, Twitter's engagement between business and consumer comes from likes, retweets, and comments (Leek et al.,

2019). Similar to the social exchange theory originated by McFardland and Ployhart (2015), engagement is a huge benefit of businesses.

Instagram has been in business for only 10 years, there is minimal research conducted, and the company was recently acquired by Facebook (MacDowell & de Souza, 2017). However, Instagram has grown faster than all social media, with over 400 million users and 80 million photos shared a day (Delafrooz et al., 2019). Instagram, whose namesake and logo were inspired by the Kodak-Instamatic, Polaroid, and the telegram, was meant to be an application that allowed Apple's iPhone users to enjoy taking square images and sharing them for everyone to see (MacDowell & de Souza, 2017). Instagram has quickly become a popular social media platform due to its ability to be a conduit of visual storytelling for its users through visual content instead of just textual information (Virtanen et al., 2017). According to Virtanen et al. (2017), Instagram is characterized by sharing pictures and videos in which users can post, like, comment, and follow others to obtain the latest information that they post (Chen et al., 2019).

Hashtags are a big component of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. A hashtag, which is represented by the # symbol in front of a single word or a sentence without spaces, allows posts of related subjects, events, or people to be easily found through a search of the hashtag (Small, 2011). Likewise, hashtags can be used to find a specific subject or content and also used for the dissemination and searching of messages, event detection, and subject analysis (Zhao et al., 2015). Social media changes not only the way content is produced but also the way in which content is consumed (Deodato, 2018). The internet innovations of platforms such as social media have played an important role in

business performance (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017). Similarly, the dramatic growth of many

social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, has created the ability

for all sized companies to be present on social media and incorporate social media into

their marketing strategies (Tarik & Adnan, 2018). Social media help business owners to

understand customer needs and motivate business owners to respond to those needs

(Tajudeen et al., 2018).

Adopting of Social Media Strategies by Small Business Owners

In this section, I reviewed the existing literature on the adoption of social media

by small business owners. Fifty percent of small businesses fail by their fifth year;

therefore, gaining insight into the success strategies of small business owners who have

sustained for longer than five years is helpful for small business owners (Turner &

Endres, 2017). Social media adoption by small business owners has been one of the

strategies that appear to help small businesses, yet many still have not adopted or

mastered how to successfully adopt social media strategies into their business practices

(Zilber et al., 2019).

Researchers have shown that social media use helps reduce costs and increase the

effectiveness of marketing activities (Tarik & Adnan, 2018). In addition, social media

affects 54% of consumers' decisions to purchase, and if small business owners research

other competitors for what generates positive reviews, they can replicate the same for

their small business (Mullikin & Borin, 2017). Moreover, even though many company

owners believe social media is important in their operations, they still struggle with how

social media should be best used (Lepkowska-White, 2017). Therefore, it is important to

understand the factors that influence the adoption of social media strategies by small business owners and the role social media plays in company success.

To explain the global increase in the adoption of social media marketing, one must look at the enormous use of social media by individuals, the effect of eWOM on consumer behaviors and relations, and trends in business globally (Wu, 2020). Yet, some business owners are unaware or ineffective in their use of social media adoption; Likewise, Emeksiz (2017) stated most small business owners lacked a team that is knowledgeable in social media marketing. Similarly, Cluley (2020) posited, the lack of knowledge in how to use social media is the dominant thing that contributes to the failure of successful social media marketing adoption. On the other hand, Zucco et al. (2017) posited even with all the adoption of recent social media innovations, small business owners in smaller underdeveloped cities find it difficult to take the leap and use social media marketing.

Due to the mass adoption of social media by consumers, some companies feel pressured into adopting social media communications (Bogea & Brito, 2018). Likewise, feeling pressured to adopt social media has a lot to do with a more recent phenomenon being addressed between social media adoption and the fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013). In addition, Oji et al. (2017) stated the factors that deter one from fully deploying social media relate to infrastructure, lack of knowledge of the potential of social media platforms, and a general lack of interest in social media. According to Yao et al., (2017), the examination of small business owners adopting social media marketing strategies, shows the firm size, manager's age, firm innovativeness, and industry sector

all play an important role in the adoption of social media by the small business owner.

Also, Alford and Page (2015) posited that small business owners lack knowledge of how

to use social media; however, they understand the importance of adopting social media

marketing for competitive advantage. Likewise, Keegan and Rowley (2017) noted that

businesses lack an understanding of how social media can be used as a marketing

strategy. However, with the power being in consumers' hands to create, consume, and

share information about businesses, businesses must use social media to stay relevant

(Arli & Dietrich, 2017).

There are potential strengths to be used as competitive advantages by adopting the

use of social media (Emanuela, 2018). By establishing inter-relationships between a

small business brand and the consumers, their interactions affect the costs, sales,

branding segmentation, and market research of small business owners, which can all be

used as competitive advantages (Bianchi & Andrews, 2015). Similarly, Ahmad et al.

(2018) noted small business owners increasingly understand social media and its benefits

to their companies. Additional benefits for small business owners have the ability to have

global reach due to an increase in customers from the use of social media (Pourkhani et

al., 2019). Arigo (2018) explains another competitive advantage is firms being able to

improve customer engagement due to data being published on open social platforms

instead of published proprietary sources. The advantage of social media platforms such as

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as a marketing tool is the business owner being able to

deliver messaging of the brand through images and video (Alfian & Nilowardono (2019).

In similar manner, Zilber et al. (2019), investigated factors that led to the adoption of social media, and as a result, organizations adopt social media when they perceive the media brings advantages to their relationships with customers. Additionally, ease of use may not be as relevant in terms of businesses adopting social media marketing practices because social media is not as technically rigorous as other business technology that requires professional development and training (Gavino et al., 2018). Webb and Roberts (2016) found that 72% of small business owners reported that they and their staff had not been trained to manage their social media accounts. Also, an innovation that is perceived as easy to understand and to use is more likely to be adopted and used (Hassan et al., 2017). Ease of use is one of the motives for Twitter's high rate of adoption (Isman & Dagdeviren, 2018). Likewise, Rogers (2003) states complexity, which is an attribute of DOI, is an important barrier to adoption. The results of research conducted by Burgess et al. (2017), supported existing literature which highlight lack of knowledge and skills related to understanding and using social media effectively as one of the reasons small businessed experience less adoption of social media.

Some of the biggest barriers to the adoption of social media by small business owners are the difficulty of managing negativity online, formulating posts, response time, which platform to use, and lack of experience (Lepkowska-White, 2017). Likewise, Bae and Zamrudi (2018) posited the speed of feedback, the timing of posts, managing content, and managing negative feedback are all challenges associated with the use of social media marketing for companies. In agreement with Bae and Zamrudi (2018), Pourkhani et al. (2019) posited due to a large amount of data and the structure of social media, it

would be difficult and financially risky for small business owners to try and conduct meaningful analysis. However, Cole et al. (2017) stated that business owners are able to easily see metrics through social media platforms and gain insight into traffic, interest, and sales, unlike traditional marketing efforts.

In the past, business owners kept internal logs of customer complaints. With the advent of social media, public negativity could damage a small business (Melankon & Dalakas, 2018). Conversely, Roy et al. (2017) asserted customers that intentionally leave feedback are either highly satisfied or dissatisfied, and those who do not make a choice one way or the other in regards to their satisfaction or lack thereof, typically will not go through the hassle or inconvenience of leaving online customer feedback. Per Cavinder et al. (2017), the adoption of social media does not appear to have an effect on other generations in terms of use for business as owners with 19 plus years in their industry were using social media at nearly the same rates as younger generations.

Social Media Marketing

The continuous development of the internet has brought about updated marketing strategies, in particular, social media marketing strategies (Tomazic (2017). Social media marketing is defined as a series of techniques that target social networks and their users to increase brand awareness or advertise a certain product (Kraus et al., 2019). Likewise, Veldeman et al. (2017) stated increasing brand awareness and brand building are essential objectives for social media adoption. Likewise, Bandyopadhyay (2016) mentioned successful social media marketing will increase brand awareness through customer engagement as well as be cost savings strategy to help with small business

performance. Schwarzl and Grabowska (2015) posited if companies have someone that can focus on social media marketing for at least 6 hours or more each week, they can generate at least three times as many leads and spend 60% less than with traditional marketing.

In contrast, Richardson et al. (2016) originated the social media marketing strategy theory, which would require a deeper, more complex framework for small business owners to implement and would require even more of their time and funds. Likewise, Srinivasan (2016) posited it is important for small business owners to understand and have a specific marketing strategy because one strategy will not work, and there is a compelling interconnection between sales revenue and the amount of time spent on social media marketing.

 Meanwhile, Yao et al. (2017) postulated if firms focused on social media marketing at least five times a week, they could increase their sales dramatically, thus, being equivalent to a large companies return on investment. In like manner, a study conducted by Gholston et al. (2016) resulted in the majority of business owners stating that they engaged with customers by frequently posting on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

On the contrary, the findings of de Vries et al. (2018) showed that consistent engagement can happen without dedicated social media staff or specialist technologies. Also, Capitello et al. (2014) found it good practice for small business owners to use a minimal number of social media platforms and focus more on meaningful, engaging content with their customers. For small business owners who are not able to afford

traditional marketing, they can gain stronger results and compete with large companies through the use of social media marketing. Similarly, Yao et al. (2017) support the claim that small business owners are able to better compete with large companies by adopting social media strategies into their process. Likewise, Kim and Choi (2019) posited small business owners have to take a different approach from the traditional norms of marketing and promotional strategies in order to utilize social media to its advantage due to differences in the social media age vs. pre-social media era. On the contrary, traditional marketing is not meant to be replaced by social media but rather serve as a means for quick, economical, and effective option (Zucco, et al., 2017).

Venciute (2018) points out that social media in the marketing context consists of customer engagement, enhancing relationships with customers, information dissemination, and enhanced reach and targeting. Similarly, Paswan (2018) states, social media marketing can be used to engage target groups, build brand visibility, and build relationships with customers. In addition, Iankova et al. (2018) stated a common theme in social media marketing is the opportunity for both business and consumer to engage in dialogue. Equally, de Vries et al.'s (2018) findings showed by posting posts that connect with people on a human vs. a business level and using images; small business owners are able to boost online engagement resulting in a potential increase of in-store traffic. Effective engagement with consumers is the equivalent of market research for a small business that is unable to have the financial capabilities of a large firm to understand market needs and trends (Kim & Choi, 2019).

As noted, in order for small business owners to stay relevant and competitive, they need to generate awareness in the marketplace (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Small business owners can achieve awareness through the use of social media. By posting, followers sharing with friends, and customers sharing feedback, small business owners build electronic word-of-mouth and awareness, allowing small business owners to interact with customers based on their feedback and build relationships (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Likewise, Keikha and Sargolzaei (2017) agreed that monitoring feedback will improve B2C relations. As with Virtanen et al. (2017), the use of social media marketing, especially with the use of images and visual content, can be effective in building awareness, increasing traffic, conversation, and sharing resulting in increased visibility and presence for small business owners.

Word of mouth communication (WOM) is a communication process in the form of giving a recommendation relating to a particular product or service (Kottler & Keller, 2012). Likewise, Kottler & Armstrong (2008) posited, WOM will persuade a customer to purchase and item or service, making WOM more of a promotional tool in marketing. Persuasion is a critical part of Rogers (2003) DOI theory, and through the use of social media, persuasion continues to be at the forefront of what's needed for small businesses to survive. As with WOM, small business owners have to refocus their strategy from promoting to communicating due to the complexities in contemporary marketing; this includes listening, informing, and reminding customers (Soedarsono et al., 2020).

WOM is a big factor in consumer confidence; if the feedback is positive, business owners will see an increase in profits; however, if negative, WOM can cause public

distrust (Alfian & Nilowardono, 2019). Similarly, Mathur (2018) postulated if small business owners leverage social media, it can increase their sales, profitability, and brand equity; however, they must use new and engaging ways to create useful and authentic content.

One of the most popular ways for companies to increase their brand visibility using social media is through the use of influencers, which is an electronic word of mouth (EWOM). EWOM can be defined as positive or negative feedback made by customers about a product or company via the internet to a mass of people (Chu & Sung, 2015). Similarly, Rogers (2003) described the process of influencers as catalysts that speed up the rate of adoption innovations as a diffusion strategy that affects the perceived attributes of innovations. Supporting this, as online shopping increases within the millennial generation, reviews by millennials help to guide other online shoppers with product information and evaluation (Roy et al., 2017).

Tariq et al. (2017) stated the impact of EWOM results in a decline of negative customer reviews and an increase in customer relations giving businesses a competitive advantage. In a similar fashion, Kim et al. (2016) postulated negative EWOM leads to negative effects on other consumers, brand awareness, attitudes, purchase intentions, sales, and revenues. Likewise, Starks and Bradley (2017) agreed that consumers will more actively post a negative review than positive reviews. Seeing as consumers have made over 500 billion impressions and comment annually about various products, it would be wise for small business owners to monitor those interactions (Allan & Ali, 2017). Conversely, Eelen et al. (2017) concluded brand loyalty is strongly related to in-

person WOM vs. eWOM. The advantage of eWOM is that there is a low cost for business owners and a high effectiveness rate by attracting many customers (Sheu & Chu, 2017).

Similar findings by Tarik and Adnan (2018) indicate people use the sharing option in social media to share content that is relatable and influences them. Furthermore, when evaluating target audiences, millennials are highly susceptible to social influence and exchange information about their preferences via Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, to name a few (Lepkowska-White, 2017). Supporting this, Manyevere and Kruger (2019) revealed 40% of the USA millennium use Instagram to help them determine big and small decisions in their lives. In the same way, Bae and Zamrudi (2018) posited social media is the staple of millennial society due to their digital influence. At the same time, small business owners need to be selective when choosing an influencer to represent their brand because perceived fit affects the brand not only through the influencer's image but also directly (Breves et al., 2019). In like manner, Hammerschlag et al. (2020) posited in their findings that small business owners used online influencers extensively as part of their social media marketing strategy and found their use effective.

Likewise, Tomazic (2017) posited Web 2.0 had brought the emergence of businesses finding ways to take advantage of social media interactions by becoming a part of the conversation and thus creating a two-way communication. Additionally, there is empirical confirmation that implies financial performance and user-generated content in social media are interconnected (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). In like manner, studies demonstrate that when customers take part in the social media activities of firms, it positively affects profitability, specifically user-generated content has a greater impact on

profits than firm-created content (Keegan & Rowley, 2017). Additionally, collaboration in the form of co-creation with customers creates a value add for small business owners; however, most small business owners focus on marketing messages only and lose out on engagement with consumers (Kim & Choi, 2019).

Also, when small business owners combine their social media communications with user-generated social media communications, there is a positive connection of trust and loyalty, resulting in positive consumer purchase intentions (Mainardes & Cardoso, 2019). It is not enough for small business owners to just keep hardware and software updated in their businesses, as Markova and Petkovska-Mircevska (2003) suggested. Wang and Kim (2017) stated that improved business performance is directly related to meeting the needs of consumers through engagement.

Virtanen et al. (2017) show that the most effective way to gain followers on social media is by following people; however, liking and commenting are best used to build relationships with existing customers. Likewise, Coelho et al. (2017) posited consumers no longer sit back and wait for companies to be active in communications, so small owners have to adapt and build relationships that foster trust and transparency. Similarly, in order to have financial benefits through the use of social media, small business owners need to understand what information is important to business performance (Li et al., 2020). According to the results of Delafrooz et al.'s (2019) study, business owners should incorporate Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter in their social media strategy. Furthermore, Zucco et al. (2017) found social media platforms beneficial to small businesses due to their low cost; however, the use of social media platforms will require time, the creation

of content, and an understanding of how to utilize connections to their customers in order to benefit from its use.

Transition and Summary

In Section 1, I introduced the topic of small business owners and social media strategies in the foundation and background of the study. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Also included are the nature of the study, research question, interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. I conclude with the significance of the study, including contribution to the business practice and implications for social change and a review of the professional and academic literature.

Section 2 will include the purpose statement, the researcher's role, description of participants selection method, research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research procedure, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data analysis, as well as reliability and validity. In Section 3, I will present the research findings, the implication to professional practice and social changes, and conclude with recommendations for action and areas of future research.

Section 2: The Project

In this section, I provide details about the research project. I start by reiterating the purpose of the study, then provide insight regarding my role as the researcher. I then provide details about the sampling strategy that was used to identify participants and an understanding of the research design and method. I also explain how my research followed ethical practices. This is followed by data collection techniques and reliability and validity of my data.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. The targeted population was comprised of five small business owners of companies with less than 10 employees located in New York City who have successfully used social media strategies to increase and retain their customer base. Park and Campbell (2018) said small businesses' social contributions help to maintain and build healthy communities. As small business owners adopt social media to grow their businesses, owners can drive economic prosperity for citizens as well as local organizations within communities through partnerships, philanthropic efforts, and tax revenues, which has implications for positive social change.

Role of the Researcher

My role as a researcher for this qualitative multi-case study was to be the observer, interviewer, transcriber, and data analyst. I have knowledge regarding use of social media as a marketing tool. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A),

which helped to reduce related biases. My population consisted of small business owners who were 18 years or older with no more than 10 employees from five different companies in New York City who had successfully used social media strategies to increase their customer base. As the interviewer, my research questions resembled guided conversations rather than structured queries.

According to Madill and Sullivan (2018), member checking is a way of assessing the validity of a qualitative study. I reduced potential biases by engaging in member checking of interview participants as well as employing triangulation. By using multiple data sources of information, I was able to overcome weaknesses and intrinsic biases as well as problems that stem from research designs (Joslin & Muller, 2016). The importance of triangulation cannot be underestimated to ensure the reliability and validity of data and results. According to Fusch et al. (2018), triangulation as depth to the data that are collected by researchers. When conducting interviews, it is important to ensure that participants are not saying what they believe one wants to hear; this is called reflexivity (Yin, 2018). To mitigate the potential for reflexivity during the interview process, I used active listening, understanding, warmth, genuineness, and acceptance to build a sense of trust and respect. To ensure I was in accordance with The Belmont Report ethical tenants of respect involving persons, beneficence, and justice, I provided informed consent forms to participate in the study, assessed risks and benefits, and selected subjects in a manner which aligned with the ethical principles of the report. Castillo-Montoya (2016) said the interview protocol is both conversational and likely to elicit information related to the study's research question. Similarly, Jacob and Furgerson

(2012), stated use of a script helps to ensure the researcher remains consistent. Therefore, I included an interview protocol to ensure I remained consistent with what I said before and after interviews, prompts to collect informed consent, and prompts to remind me of the information I was interested in collecting.

Participants

Gaining physical access to participants, building rapport, and demonstrating sensitivity are all characteristics that determine the success of the researcher (Saunders et al., 2016). I used purposeful criterion and random sampling to recruit participants to partake in interviews. Palinkas et al. (2015) said purposeful sampling is the process in which the researcher identifies and selects individuals who are knowledgeable about a phenomenon, and random sampling involves generalizing selection of individuals, thereby helping to minimize potential bias. All participants in this study were 18 years or older, small business owners with less than 10 employees, had been in business at least five years, successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers (which could be demonstrated by showing a correlation between an increase in profitability and/or revenue and social media posting campaign strategies), and operated their business in the New York City area. I identified potential participants from the NYC Small Business Directory, Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises Directory, my personal network, and social media. I cross-referenced databases to ensure companies met criteria for size, location, and type of business. I then randomly selected and checked for evidence that these companies successfully use social media by reviewing their social media activity to ensure they promoted brand awareness and customer engagement. As

stated by Reich (2014), participant recruitment is rarely done without problems, therefore I was prepared to use the snowball sampling method to recruit participants as well. Consent letters were emailed to owners of small businesses who met the criteria for my research, and I retained names of those who consented in case someone rescinded their participation in my study. By focusing on participants whose businesses were in the same New York City area I lived in, this allowed me the opportunity to start building a rapport with business owners that could lead to establishing trust between us. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted virtual interviews via the online video conferencing platform Zoom. Using Zoom allowed me to mitigate any COVID-19 risks to participants and myself. Harris (2019) said interviews of people with like backgrounds leads to cultural bonding and validates the importance of building a rapport. To build a rapport with my participants, I discussed my background and explained to them the importance of my study for academic purposes. Once I established a working relationship, I proceeded to begin formal interviews.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

Typically, there are three types of research: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Qualitative research allows for in-depth insights and understanding of real-world problems (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). As the goal of my study was to gain an in-depth understanding of social media strategies used by small business owners to gain and retain customers, neither quantitative nor the mixed methods approach were appropriate because I did not use any quantifiable variables. Taguchi (2018) said qualitative research

does not involve operating on predetermined variables and is more exploratory via the use of interviews, observations, and field notes to understand a phenomenon. Yin (2015) said qualitative research is appropriate to investigate a topic in-depth. Mixed methods research involves purposefully mixing quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed methods research is about using quantitative and qualitative methods systematically in a way that they reinforce each other's results and interpretations (Taguchi, 2018). My research focused on interpreting phenomena instead of relationships between variables.

Research Design

Frequent designs used in qualitative research are case studies, archival analysis, and surveys (Yin, 2018). A case study design was appropriate for my study because I wanted to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context. Yin (2018) said single-case designs are vulnerable due to the possibility of not having enough substantive information as well as relying on only one interpretation. In this study, I chose a multicase study design because I wanted to conduct extensive research with enough rigour to explore my research question and allow for wider discovery of a contemporary phenomenon. According to Yin (2018), how and why questions enable the tracking of operational processes over time, as opposed to frequencies or incidence that are used in quantitative research. I conducted semistructured interviews with small business owners who have successfully gained and retained customers through their use of social media based on social media posts and financial reporting. According to Yin (2018), case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence and part of my strategy was to triangulate data using various sources. Part of my strategy was

to triangulate data using various sources. One of the ways in which qualitative research is assessed is by ensuring data saturation. Data saturation is when data contains all necessary information to answer research questions (Lowe et al., 2018). Majid et al. (2018) said the process to ensure data saturation involves asking the same questions for every interview and using the interview coding system until no further new coding is possible. I decided to follow this process to achieve data saturation.

I did not choose an ethnographic design because I was not trying to discover or describe a group's culture within their environment. I also did not choose a phenomenological design because that involves lived experiences and would be more suitable if I were asking customers of participants about their experiences. Grounded theory was not an appropriate design option because I am not developing a theory, which is what grounded theory is designed to do.

Population and Sampling

The population for the study was five small business owners of companies with less than 10 employees located in the New York City area who have successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Yin (2018) said in order to achieve certainty, the sample can be four to six participants. My sources for obtaining potential participants was companies that fit criteria of my population from the NYC Small Business Directory, NYC Minority and Women-Owned Business Enterprises Directory, my personal network, and social media. I used purposeful sampling to select the five participants for my study. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to be selective based on their own judgements when choosing participants for a study (Bradshaw et al., 2017).

Purposeful sampling consists of selecting every subject that meets participant criteria until the required sample size is achieved (Naderifar et al., 2017). The method of purposeful sampling that I used was the snowball technique. The snowballing technique involves identifying a group of people, and after gathering data, asking them to recommend other potential participants (Naderifar et al., 2017). To determine the proper sample size, one must determine the degree of certainty for replication. For this reason, I chose five participants. Cleary et al. (2014) said having large sample sizes could result in superficial data that holds no validity. Therefore, the sample size is about quality and not quantity. According to Clearly et al. (2014), qualitative research and sample sizes are about reaching redundancy which means there are no new themes. Once at the point where there are no new themes, one has the correct sample size. Lowe et al. (2018) said thematic saturation is achieved when further observation and analysis reveal no new themes. To prove data saturation, I used a saturation table in conjunction with my codebook of defined themes.

Ethical Research

In higher education and research institutions, ethical research standards are a significant component of research, and ethical approval by an appointed Institutional Review Board (IRB) is necessary when dealing with human participants (Farrugia, 2019). By providing participants of my study with an informed consent form, instructions on how to withdraw from the study, confidentiality, and anonymity, I conducted my research in an ethical way. Conducting research in an ethical way is morally good and avoids harming anyone during my study. For my study, I also confirmed that all participants

were over the age of 18 by stating this as a requirement in the participant invitation (see Appendix B).

All participants were given the background and purpose of my study, and those who agreed to take part in my study were required to sign a consent form that had my contact information as well as Walden University. Participants were informed that any personal information would remain confidential, and they could withdraw from my study at any point without penalty. Participants could also request to withdraw from the study verbally during the interview process or by providing a written letter or email up to the publication of this study. Information in the consent form complied with IRB guidelines and addressed the purpose of the study, consent to record interviews, specific questions I was going to ask, interview structure, and how I planned to use the gathered information. No incentives were offered to participants, and at any time, they were able to opt out of the study. At the beginning of each interview, I assured participants of their anonymity and explained to them how I would be using coding and password protection to ensure confidentiality of information. Farrugia (2019) said promising confidentiality and anonymity also requires the researcher to have a plan in terms of how to manage and store collected data. All data collected from the study were stored on a private external USB drive and locked in my fireproof safe where it will be kept for 5 years. Five years after the approval of my study, I will destroy all digital files via permanent deletion and shred any documents to ensure rights of participants are protected.

Data Collection Instruments

The objective of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. The primary data collection tool in a qualitative study is the researcher (Clark & Veale, 2018). I used a semistructured interview guide (see Appendix C) as well as data collected from owners of companies I spoke with. Semistructured interviews involve a prepared list of topics and questions (Brown & Danaher, 2019). In addition, Brown and Danaher (2019) said semistructured interviews ensure that questions elicit open responses for participants that enable lines of conversation to be developed in ways that could not have been anticipated when the interview schedule was being planned.

I reached out to participants who agreed to participate in the study via telephone and email to set up virtual conference call times that were convenient for them. La Iacono et al. (2016) stated using a cloud-based video communication interview works well as a viable alternative or complementary data collection tool for qualitative researchers. Interview protocols are a structured data collection method that helps to control for confounding influences due to differences in questions or ways in which questions are presented (Watts et al., 2017). The interview protocol was used for my study to help me in terms of remaining unbiased during interviews (see Appendix A). An audio recording device was used during the interview process. According to Neale (2016), audio recordings should be transcribed verbatim. The audio recorder aided in the accurate collection of data from interviewees and assisted in my analysis of identifying themes.

Using data triangulation and member checking, I validated the data during the collection process. For this study, data collection sources included the semistructured interview of five small business owners once they accepted my invitation after IRB approval to participate (see Appendix B), and a review of company documents that included social media posts, sales reports, social media analytics, and insights, as well as other documents the small business owners provided me detailing data they collect. Through member checking, the participants were able to ensure their responses are accurately reflected in the study. Coding is one of the most important stages of qualitative data analysis and quantifies the data to see what themes exist (Male, 2016). Using the NVivo system, I coded and categorized themes from the interviews and explained my findings.

Data Collection Technique

There are several methods to collect data for qualitative case studies. Data collection procedures include making observations in real-world environments, semistructured interviews, focus groups, and documentation (Yin, 2018). My primary data collection techniques were semistructured interviews, social media posts, and internal data from companies such as sales reports and archival records. Due to COVID-19 I collected rich data by conducting online interviews with small business owners who had successfully used social media to gain or retain customers. It is important for a researcher to understand that the interview protocol is for them and not for the person being interviewed. Using an interview protocol will help to keep the researcher on track

as data collection proceeds (Yin, 2018). In order to maintain consistency, I used an interview protocol (See Appendix A).

Interviews make it possible to collect rich data, and although I was not able to conduct them in-person, I was able to conduct them via Zoom and still got to see the participants in their place of business. Hitchings and Latham (2020) posited interview participants being in the context of their everyday lives prompts respondents to recall the details of how they operate that might be overlooked in other circumstances. However, there are some disadvantages to interviews, such as it being time-consuming. By providing participants with the option to conduct the interviews via video conference it allowed them with more flexibility in their schedules to meet with me. Reviewing social media posts by the companies was an advantage because it provided me with insights into how the companies used social media marketing. A disadvantage to reviewing the social media of companies is how quickly social media changes; however, by being thorough in describing my procedures, replication will be possible. Internal data helped me to gain a better perspective of the successful social media marketing strategies that the small business owners used. The disadvantage of using internal data is participants might not have been comfortable providing information such as sales reports due to the sensitivity of the information. By assuring the small business owners about the confidentiality of my study, and that no attribution would be involved if they provided me with sales report data, it mitigated the sensitivity issue.

Once I received approval from the Walden IRB, I contacted potential candidates and purposefully select the five candidates for the study based on criteria and availability.

I then obtained the informed consent forms, which also included the consent to record

them. Next, I reached out to the participants to schedule the interviews and then

conducted the recorded interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the

participants that their participation was voluntary and that no form of compensation was

going to be given. I opted to use the TranscribeMe! app to ensure I captured the

interviews verbatim. In addition, I maintained the confidentiality of my participants and

coded their names using numerical values. I conducted member checking once the

interviews were complete. All information and recordings were stored on a private

external USB drive, locked in my fire proof safe for five years. Five years after the

approval of my study I will destroy all digital files via permanent deletion and paper

shred any documents to ensure the rights of the participants are protected.

Data Organization Technique

I used a password-protected Google Suite, which includes Google Calendar,

Google Sheets, and Google Docs, to help with data organization. All the same questions

were asked of each participant. I compared the interview data with reported data and

observations from their social media sites. To protect the participants, I referred to each

participant as a coded number from 1-5. Using a recording device, I digitally recorded the

interviews and used the NVivo system to organize and code the data so I could identify

all themes. Williams and Moser (2019) posited the researcher still must move through

each phase of coding; the software simply supports an easier capture of the researchers'

coding and construction of meaning. I used the TranscribeMe! app to assist in

transcribing the interviews and edited the transcription to ensure I captured the interviews

verbatim. To maintain a record of all the processes used during data collection, I used a reflective journal. The privacy guidelines were provided in the consent form for participants, and their personally identifiable information remained anonymous. All data collected from the study was stored on a private external USB drive, locked in my fire proof safe for five years. Five years after the approval of my study I will destroy all digital files via permanent deletion and paper shred all documents to ensure the rights of the participants are protected.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing data, encoding data to create themes, and then interpreting the data, which is how I conducted my data analysis. Yin (2018) posited data analysis involves looking for patterns, insights, or concepts that seem promising. Another method of data analysis that I used is visual mapping. Using some traditional methods of data analysis, such as the physical act of writing on sticky notes, arranging sticky notes, rearranging them into the visual map, will help provide more meaningful interaction with the data (Maher et al., 2018). From there, I used Google sheets to conduct my initial coding and then used the NVivo software to assist in my data analysis. Yin (2018) posited the NVivo software could serve as an assistive tool with textual data by helping match, count incidences, and combinations of code. I then used the outcomes to continue analyzing the data. Another method of data analysis is done by compiling major themes, disassembling, reassembling, and interpreting the data (Castleberry & Nolan, 2018). I focused on key themes by transcribing participant's interviews and categorizing major themes. Once I categorized

the themes, I correlated the themes back to my research question, Rogers (2003) DOI

theory, and identified similarities and differences from the literature review.

Another technique I used to analyze the data is triangulation. Triangulation adds

depth to the data collected by using interview data and data collected from documentation

provided (Fusch et al., 2018). Triangulation also helps to mitigate the bias of data

collection. By obtaining information from the companies through social media posts,

reports, and analytics, the data helped to validate the information provided by the

participants during the interview process.

<div align="center">**Reliability and Validity**</div>

Reliability

Reliability in qualitative research is rooted in the idea of data adequacy, which

makes it possible to show consistent support for one's analysis across participants (Spiers

et al., 2018). Dependability is a criterion for reliability in qualitative research, and I

achieved dependability by conducting triangulation. I conducted triangulation by

collecting data from various sources. Fusch et al. (2018) posited triangulation would help

to get an accurate view of the phenomenon one is studying. Conducting interviews,

gathering reports, and observing social media posts are a few of the various sources by

which I collected data.

Validity

Validity in qualitative research is about ensuring the researcher continuously

checks and verifies to ensure the information is truthful. Qualitative research is based on

the fact that validity is a matter of trustworthiness, utility, and dependability (Mohajan,

2017). Some of the criteria for judging the trustworthiness of qualitative research are

credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Hays, 2016). However, the

two most essential parts are credibility and transferability (Mohajan, 2017). Credibility is

enhanced by the researcher describing his or her experiences as a researcher and

verifying the research findings with the participants (Cope, 2014). One of the ways in

which I ensured the credibility of my research was by conducting member checking.

Iivari (2018) posited member checking involves the researcher providing the interviewees

with the ability to check comments or approve the researcher's interpretation of the

information provided. I used member checking to allow participants to validate my

interpretation of their responses. By conducting member checking, I increased the

internal and external validity of my research. By strictly adhering to my interview

protocol (see Appendix A) and data collection techniques, I was able to establish the

transferability of the study. Cleary et al. (2014) posited having large sample sizes, which

tend to happen with inexperienced interviewers, could result in superficial data and data

that holds no validity, just large amounts of data itself. Therefore, the sample size is about

quality and not mere numbers. As stated by Clearly et al. (2014), qualitative research and

sample sizes are about reaching redundancy. Once you have no new themes, data

saturation has happened. To ensure data saturation, I asked the same questions for every

interview and used the interview coding system until no further new coding was possible.

Transition and Summary

Within Section 2, I provided thorough information regarding my research study. I

explained the purpose of the research study and the role I play as a researcher. I provided

details regarding my selection of participants as well as the population that I will be pooling from. In addition, I provided comprehensive details for my choice in conducting a qualitative study and the supporting research design. In regards to data, I justified the how, where, and way in which I would collect data as well as how I would ensure I followed ethical guidelines for my study. I concluded Section 2 with techniques to apply reliability and validity assurances of the research study. In Section 3, I will provide the findings of my study on successful social media strategies for small business owners to gain and retain customers. Section 3 will also include my recommendations, reflections, as well as the conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. I conducted five semistructured interviews with business owners in the New York City area who were successful in using social media to gain and retain customers and had sustained their business for 5 or more years. Small business owners of five different businesses served as participants for this study. All interviews were conducted using Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to socially distance to avoid transmission of the virus.

I reviewed each small business owner's social media pages as well as archived insight reports provided by them as part of the document review process to support findings through methodological triangulation. I collected, compiled, and organized my data from reflective journal notes and visual mapping into Google Sheets and then used NVivo 12 software to assist in coding data into themes. Using thematic analysis, I identified significant recurring themes. The results of my interpretation of the data revealed five major themes.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was: What social media strategies have small business owners used to successfully gain and retain customers? I conducted semistructured Zoom interviews with five small business owners in various industries. Industries included clothing line, retail clothing store, poling exercise, event

planning, and a spa. All participants provided consent via email to participate in the study. All interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. Participants answered nine questions and interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded using the TranscribeMe app. I transcribed voice-recorded interviews using Microsoft Word to help with the creation of coding themes.

Data were also collected from participants' social media posts on various platforms during different days and various times of the day, observing comments by participants as well as the small business owners target audience, posts, likes, Instagram Stories, and Instagram Reels. In addition, I reviewed archived campaign post insights which are specific posts that small business owners conducted as ad campaigns that show the engagement results along with sales reports related to posts provided from small business owners for use as a source of secondary data. I used a reflective journal during the interview to take notes and also used Yin's five steps of data analysis which include reviewing, organizing, coding and interpreting data, and drawing conclusions. To confirm validity of data collected during interviews, I conducted member checking with interviewees to ensure interpretation of data was accurately captured.

P1 has been in business for 5 years and was the only one managing social media for the business. P2 has been in business for 9 years and manages social media posts with several other people in the store. P3 has been in business for 8 years and was the only one managing social media for the business. P4 has been in business for 14 years and was the only one managing social media for the business. P5 has been in business for 7 years and has the help of a social media manager to assist with social media posts. Each participant

indicated that social media had been the reason they were able to gain and retain customers successfully by correlating their posts and timing of posts with increases in sales.

I started the data collection process by adhering to the interview protocol created for this study. I took notes in my reflective journal and reviewed social media pages on various platforms. I then reached out to participants to not only collect archived insight reports but also ask them to review my interpretations of interviews, ensure validity, and mitigate bias. I then conducted visual mapping using sticky notes and transferred themes to Google Sheets. I used NVivo 12 to assist in coding data to reveal recurring themes and their frequency. To ensure personally identifiable information was not used in the study, I replaced participants names with pseudonyms (P1-P5). All personal information provided during recorded interviews such as names and names of businesses will remain secure via a private external USB drive and locked in my fire proof safe for 5 years. Five years after approval of my study, I will destroy all digital files via permanent deletion and shred any documents to ensure rights of participants are protected. The conceptual framework used in this study was Rogers' DOI theory. The constructs of the DOI theory serve as a guide for small business owners to understand when to adopt a new innovation that could be pivotal for their business. Desmarchelier et al. (2016) said that an innovation must meet the needs of the small business owner and exceed the same need for diffusion to happen. Social media usage by small business owners has the potential to meet and exceed their needs. To support claims, direct participant quotes were used as well as frequency tables.

Data gathered from participant interviews allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of how small business owners use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: use of popular social media platforms, consistency and timing of posts, quality of content, maintaining relationships through engagement, and gaining technical knowledge. Table 2 details themes that emerged when using NVivo to analyze data in this study.

Table 2

Frequency of Developed Themes

	Business 1	Business 2	Business 3	Business 4	Business 5
Theme 1	6	8	7	15	6
Theme 2	4	3	10	8	5
Theme 3	14	11	2	8	9
Theme 4	4	13	19	17	15
Theme 5	6	2	6	5	2

Theme 1: Use of Popular Social Media Platforms

By 2021, three billion users worldwide are expected to use social media (Muhammed et al., 2021). The first theme identified from data collection involved platforms that small business owners used to gain and retain customers. Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were highly influential and attracted millions of active users which appeal to small business owners. The platforms used by all participants in order of their importance were Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and Snapchat. Instagram has become one of the social media platforms whose growth due to visual content has tremendously grown past its competitors (Sukunesan et al., 2020).

Instagram has grown 7% between 2017 and 2019, while most of its competitors have remained flat (Alsaleh et al., 2019).

TikTok and Snapchat were found to be platforms that participants would like to participate in but felt too overwhelmed to indulge in, although a few were trying it out tentatively. P4said they were having a hard time navigating TikTok due to its complexity. Ali (2017) said complexity will have a significant negative effect on adoption. Cavinder et al. (2017) said Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter were the most common social media platforms used by businesses, with Twitter being the least used. People's attitudes towards innovation will affect their rate of adoption (Beattie et al., 2019). Participants indicated that it was the growth of online shopping and e-commerce that forced them to use social media marketing strategies whether they wanted to or not. Rogers (2003) said laggards adopt an innovation due to pressures from other adopter groups. Bogeo et al. (2018) said the adoption of social media by consumers led to pressuring small business owners to adopt social media as well. P2 stated "we realized word of mouth would not work anymore due to the growth of e-commerce." P2 said, "you have to be where everybody is, everybody is on Facebook and Instagram." WOM plays a big role in small business profitability and brand equity because people place more value and trust in a business' services and products when they have the feedback from someone they know or admire (Mathur, 2018). Lashgari et al. (2018) said social media is an effective way to expand word of mouth that is normally restricted to a smaller geographic range. Small business owners as well as online shoppers rely on EWOM (Roy et al., 2017).

Although Facebook is used by all, Instagram is the dominating platform. All participants mentioned linking their social media accounts to save time posting separately on each account. However, there were some differences in terms of which posts get posted on what platform according to small business owners. Participants also identified that followers on each platform were different. Several participants implied Instagram has a more young and fun audience, while Facebook was a more mature audience, and thus they post differently for each platform. Wahid et al. (2020) said Facebook and Instagram's demographic users were not the same with Facebook having an older consumer base and Instagram a younger base.

All participants implied that Instagram was their top platform of choice. Instagram can generate four times more interactions compared to Facebook, and more people spend more time on Instagram than any other social media platform (Wahid et al., 2020). With Instagram being the top platform used by participants in this study, all participants mentioned using various features of the platform such as Stories and Reels to appeal to their potential and current customer base. P5 said:

> Instagram Stories is like a new thing that Instagram wants people to use, I remember when it first came out and everybody left Snapchat and people didn't know if they should be on Snapchat or Instagram. But Instagram was very smart because Stories last for 24 hours and as a business owner you are able to show the services that your customers have come in and done and people want to see people getting services done. We use Stories to do that. We capture live moments

of services and experiences of our customers. In order to grow your business you

have to show the services that you're doing.

P2 explained:

When they created stories on Instagram, it really changed the game because

there's a such thing I believe, is like oversharing or overfeeding like with brands

or just posting too much on the feed stories kind of changed and stories is what

allows you to give your brand personality which allows you to show behind the

scenes and which we're working on and where you didn't have to waste a post and

just oversaturate into your feed and other people's feed with mundane stuff.

Stories did a really good service to small businesses.

With Reels being the newer feature on Instagram, only two of the participants mentioned

using the new feature. P3 said, "Reels is a new thing that can grow your business." (see

Table 3)

Table 3

Platforms Used By Small Business Owners

	Business 1	Business 2	Business 3	Business 4	Business 5
Instagram	X	X	X	X	X
Facebook	X	X	X	X	X
Twitter	X	X		X	
TikTok			X		X
Snapchat					X

Theme 2: Consistency and Timing of Posts

Knowing when to share content is important in terms of performance for small business owners and can play a role in influencing engagement (Wahid et al., 2020). The second theme identified from data collection was consistency and timing of posts. Every participant identified consistency and timing of posts as a most major part of their strategy that has helped them in terms of being successful on social media in order to gain and retain customers. P1 used a strategy of posting every day at specific times of the day. Specifically, P1 would post before 9:30am or in the evening at 7pm. Likewise, P4 said they liked to post their content in threes so when people go to their page, they see some type of consistency. P5 stated they post three posts a day and at least six stories a day on Instagram.

According to Wahid et al. (2020), the number of likes for Facebook posts increases during breakfast and lunch and decreases during dinner, while Instagram also generates a higher number of comments during those times as well. All participants seemed to have more likes and comments during the daytime hours than in the evening.

Kraus (2019) said a major challenge for small business owners was consistently posting, and in order to overcome this challenge, small business owners should create a content schedule and plan their posts. Planning what to post and when to post content on social media seems to be a natural task for some participants while others preferred planning tools in order to post. P3, P4 and P5 explained that they used some type of planning tool when posting their content to ensure they maintained a consistent social

media presence. The advantages of using a social media management tool include the ability to add multiple accounts and platforms, logging into all of them at once, customizing views of content, and easier scheduling of content (Watson, 2017). P4 stated they used an app called Later to schedule their posts. P5 said:

> Planoly is an app where you can put all of your feed, you can lay it out to see if you like how it will look, put the time of when you want it to go up, we use it to plan out how it's going to look. But we post it organically. Like we post it, we don't let the app post. But that's what we use to help with time to help with management.

Wahid et al. (2020) said there was such a thing as overloading users' feeds, which resulted in content that was hidden from users. This problem was the reason why consistency in posting as well as timing was an important strategy. P3 and P4 found that algorithms built into social media platforms were the reason for posting so frequently because they were trying to combat changing algorithms that can leave them unseen by followers and potential new customers (see Table 4). Out of the five participants in this study, two had staff help them post to social media platforms so they were consistently posting. The other three participants did all the posting themselves. Similarly, Vries et al., (2018) stated consistent engagement does not require having dedicated staff to do the posting, small business owners can do the posting themselves.

Table 4

Small Business Owners' Consistency Strategies

	Business 1	Business 2	Business 3	Business 4	Business 5
Posting Everyday	X	X	X	X	X
Planning Post	X	X	X		X

Theme 3: Quality of Content

Quality social media content encompasses the needs, behaviors, beliefs and feelings of followers (Aladwani, 2017). The third theme identified was quality of content. Quality content based on participant responses involves quality of images and videos, color schemes and patterns, posts that showed brand personality, and reflected what was going on at any given moment. In regard to quality of the images and videos, participants stated they used high quality images and videos with good resolution. Some participants stated they had specific color schemes they used. P5 said:

Aesthetics is very important for our Instagram page. Green is very calming, peaceful and relaxing. It's going to make people want to come and tantalize you and makes you feel peaceful and makes you feel relaxed and its tranquility, you want to get the service done. So the colors of the page is very like bright, it's greens, it's creams, it's whites. You rarely see black, because black is so dark.

Participants also indicated they use specific patterns when posting such as their posts telling a story or being organized in a certain manner. Other participants stating they post

in three's and that the three images speak to one another. After observing the participants Instagram pages you can clearly see how the pictures speak to one another on some participants pages, for instance P4 had one row of the three pictures that all reflected wedding party group pictures and then another row showcasing shoes, and then another row showcasing venues. Kraus (2019) postulated that there were many demographic factors that play a role in what was considered quality content to a specific audience; age, education and economic status will all be determining factors as to what one considers quality content. Therefore, when looking at content that was relatable or what resonates with a person, one must consider the target audience. In affirmation of previous literature Tarik et al. (2018) postulated that in the use of social media people share content that is relatable and influences them.

Reflective in the data collection, to show their personality or the brand's personality participants expressed that they posted information that was relatable, that resonates with people and posts that people can see themselves in. P1 stated "my posts reflect who I am and people relate to that". Meanwhile P3 stated "my posts fill a need for like-minded people". Several participants alluded to posting content that was relevant to what is going on in the world by stating the content has to be current. P5 indicated "If something crazy happens in the world, and I wake up, and I find out about it, and we were supposed to have something specific posted, I text the chat and I'm like, don't post it because it's not important. We got to stop it, we got to pause it."

Theme 4: Maintaining Relationships Through Engagement

The fourth theme was maintaining relationships through engagement. All participants stated that in order to gain customers and retain them they used some form of engagement with the customers to maintain positive relationships with their potential or existing customers. Some of the engagement strategies used by participants were (a) reviewing analytics from Google; (b) Shopify analytics; (c) Facebook and Instagram insights to see what works and what does no; (d) use of paid ads through platforms such as Facebook and Instagram; (e) posting of events on Instagram stories; (f) commenting; (g) tagging; (h) liking; (i) reposting; and (j) direct messaging to establish interpersonal relationships. Cole et al., (2017) posits technological advances such as insights and other analytical tools provide a way for business owners to easily analyze their data. In a study conducted by Pogorevich (2020), the findings indicated that successful engagement was built through the use of ads on Facebook and/or Instagram, communicating in active dialogue via comments and direct messages. In support of previous literature, user-generated social media communications result in positive consumer purchase intentions (Mainardes et al., 2019). All participants reported using commenting, reposting and direct messages as forms of communicating with customers that helped them to increase sales.

All participants used Instagram Stories as a way to engage with potential and current clients. Several participants used Stories as a way to post pop up events and some used it to show the "behind the scenes" of what happens within their businesses as a means to engage with customers. This resulted in comments and direct message's that small business owners would respond to in order to create dialogue between potential

and/or retained customers and them. In correlation to previous literature, hashtags play a big role in social media and create interpersonal relationships with their customers (Small, 2011). Participant 3 expressed they created their own hastag and from there they were able to also tell people to spread the word by using the hashtag, which also helped them find more people to be able to post and repost on the page.

All participants responded to likes and comments by potential or current customers to maintain interpersonal relationships, and by responding quickly to potential or current customers' requests they found it to be the best way to keep them engaged to increase sales. P2 stated:

> Sometimes people have to see that outfit on a person rather than a mannequin. People tell you in the comments; can we see that jacket, that shirt on a person? Some people need to see it on someone, then they'll tell you in the comments, can you do a video. So we started doing videos of people trying on different outfits, walking around, showing the fit, and people love it.

Shabbir et al. (2020) postulated customer engagement as an interactive co-created experience which goes beyond a purchase, and social media has only increased engaging activities through content creation, commenting, and questioning and answering. Similarly, participants mentioned putting a face to the brand and showing their personality, reposting customers as well as tagging customers as a way to engage to build relationships.

Theme 5: Gaining Technical Knowledge

Cluley (2020 said successful social media marketing adoption failure was due to lack of knowledge in how to use a platform. P1, P3, P4 and P5 all stated they needed to upskill in order to keep up with the changes of the social media platforms. P1 stated he used YouTube videos to help him upskill and learn the ins and outs of being effective with social media marketing, while P3 said she joined a group called Business Insider to gain her knowledge. P4 stated they used blogs to stay informed on how to post and all of them identified trial and error as a way to learn as well. P2 and P5 even had social media marketing positions within their business to help them with what they don't know. P4 stated they were having a hard time learning TikTok. Tiktok is an example of a technology that is in its early majority stage. According to Rogers (2003) DOI theory, a technological innovation that is in the early majority stage, later becomes adopted by more and more users and forces small business owners to learn and adopt to these changes in order to continue being successful. Other researchers (Alford et al., 2015) indicated even though small business owners might lack the knowledge on how to use a social media platform, they do understand the importance which was in alignment with Rogers (2003) DOI theory. When discussing learning how to use the platform TikTok, Participant 4 said they needed to teach themselves how to use the platform and had already created a few TikToks but they still do not understand it to the point where they can use TikTok to their fullest advantage.

In correlation with previous studies the age of the company and sector play an important role in the adoption of social media by small business owners (Yao et al., 2017).

Similarly, some participants stated they have used social media since the inception of their businesses. In alignment with the literature, the rate at which new technological innovations through social media are created, make existing social media technology obsolete and the implications are everyone having to learn new online procedures (Chatzigeorgiou et al., 2020). In summary, the study's findings align with the DOI theory and the existing body of literature.

Applications to Professional Practice

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Small business owners across various industries could use the information in this study to increase their sales through the use of popular social media platforms, planned and consistent postings on the social media platforms, visually entertaining posts that are relatable, purposely engaging with customers to build relationships as well as increasing their knowledge of the various social media platforms and their updates so they don't fall behind in their social media marketing strategies.

In this study, participants were using the most popular platforms at the moment which were Instagram and Facebook, but they were also aware of currently trending platforms such as TikTok and Snapchat. Small business owners understood they would need to learn these new platforms in order to continue to gain new customers which aligns with the first theme. Additionally, the knowledge the participants already have about new and upcoming platforms aligns with Rogers (2003) DOI theory that the first step to diffusion was knowledge which was when a person is made aware of the

innovation. It also aligns with step two which was persuasion which was when a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the innovation was developed. As detailed in the study findings, some participants have moved to stage three which was the decision phase of engaging in activities that lead to adoption or rejection.

The participants highlighted how they were consistent in posting their content whether it's several times a day or a week which aligned with my observations of their Instagram feeds. Similarly, the third theme of quality of content was supported by the color schemes, quality of images as well as posting content that was relevant to what their businesses focused on that customers wanted. The fourth theme of maintaining relationships through engagement was supported by participants responding to comments and direct messages of potential and retained customers to ensure they build relationships. Lastly, relevant to the fifth theme, participants mentioned having to gain technical knowledge of how algorithms of each social media platform worked and to update or relearn those skills as the social media networks continued to adjust the algorithm patterns.

Additional Correlations with Conceptual Framework and Literature

This study involved using Rogers' DOI theory. The first stage is knowledge and becoming aware of innovation, persuasion which is the attitude of how one perceives the innovation, the decision to engage which will determine whether one adopts or rejects the innovation, implementation when the innovation is put in place and the confirmation, the reinforcement of the decision. All participants became aware of social media, perceived social media as a positive choice for their businesses, decided to start using social media

in some capacity, implemented social media within their marketing strategies and were reinforced by its use due to an increase in gaining customers and the ability to retain them. Similarly, the study findings also support the work of Felix et al. (2017) in that the use of social media platforms by sharing products, services and events to communicate with consumers and all participants stated doing just that. According to Baierle et al. (2020), the advent of global competition of large companies has forced small business owners to implement the use of technology-based capabilities in an effort to stay afloat. In affirmation of previous literature (Delafrooz et al., 2019; Virtanen et al., 2017) the findings of this study result in Instagram being the lead platform due to the growth of Instagram become popular in such a short period of time.

Two of the limitations of this study are that it was based in a heavily populated area, and focused on small business owners with less than 10 employees. My suggestion would be that this study be conducted in a quantitative study as well as conducting the study with medium-sized enterprises with more than 10 employees and trying rural locations where populations will be greatly reduced to see if the findings are still the same.

In summary, small business owners could benefit from the study by increasing their knowledge about how to gain and retain customers through the use social media marketing strategies. In alignment with the constructs of the DOI theory which are innovation, communication channels, time and social system; all small business owners used the new innovation of social media to communicate with their customers through quality posts and posting at certain times that make the posts more appealing to members

of a social system resulting in increases in likes, followers, comments, customers and sales. Applying these strategies could lead to long-term sustainable growth for small business owners.

Implications for Social Change

With over 164,505 COVID-19 cases by April of 2020, New York City was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Lamb, 2020). This resulted in many business owners being forced to shut down due to lack of strategies to sustain. Some small business owners could have survived if they understood the importance of social media strategies and how to actually use them to their advantage. However, many businesses did survive and part of that was due to their ability to switch over and use social media platforms to continue gaining revenue. In an era of digitalization and fast paced environments, organizations have to change just as fast in order to survive (Bolesnikov et al., 2019).

The information in this study could help with local employment because as businesses that survived the COVID-19 pandemic continue to thrive, they are able to hire more employees. The implication for positive social change is the sustainability of small businesses through the use of social media by generating the opportunity for economic prosperity within their communities in New York City, especially during a pandemic. Increased revenue for businesses could mean more disposable income to spend locally in their communities. In addition, small business owners who implement successful social media strategies to gain and retain customers could help economic prosperity through community partnerships, philanthropic efforts, environmental efforts, and tax revenues.

Lastly, the knowledge gained by the findings of this study by small business owners could facilitate word of mouth feedback to other businesses resulting in growth for others in the community.

Recommendations for Action

Small business owners in various industries could use the insights I have provided in the study to help them use social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Pollak and Markovic (2021) postulated that the reliability, consistency and instantaneous features of social media allow small businesses to thrive. Based on the findings of this study I recommend (a) small business owners gain an awareness of the benefits to using social media strategies to help them grow their businesses and determine which of those platforms would be best for their target audience (b) I recommend small business owners invest in learning social media marketing strategies and/or hire a person to help them with this aspect. Keeping abreast of social media trends and learning how to use the platforms is a strategy that will keep small business owners ahead of their competitors. Several participants mentioned YouTube as a learning tool to gain insight and the best ways to take advantage of social media marketing strategies (c) I suggest small business owners use a planning tool or create a scheduling calendar for what content to post and when, which will require them to pay attention to their insights so they can understand what is working for them and what is not. (d) I recommend that small business owners engage with their potential and retained customers in a timely manner through comments, reposting and direct messages.

I believe the findings would be useful as webinars, training sessions and conferences for small business owners to understand how the adoption of social media marketing strategies are beneficial to their businesses and long-term growth. Although the participants in this study were successful in using social media to gain and retain customers, social media continues to be an innovation that keeps evolving and small business owners need to employ lifelong learning in regards to technological trends so they don't find themselves behind the curve when another platform beyond Instagram becomes the dominate one. One of the biggest challenges for small business owners was lack of knowledge. To bridge the gap in lack of knowledge, I believe educators and others experienced in social media marketing strategies should conduct sessions for small businesses at their local libraries, at small business conferences and industry specific events so that other small business owners could have awareness of the benefits of social media as well as the strategies to be confident in growing their business.

This qualitative study could be interpreted in various ways based on who is conducting the research and who the participants were. Therefore, my last recommendation is that a quantitative study be run using the themes that emerged to gain a more in-depth understanding of how successful social media strategies can help small business owners gain and retain customers. Additionally, I will be providing a summary of the findings and conclusion of this study with the participants and conduct a few webinars to educate small business owners on the benefits of implementing social media to gain and retain customers.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings of this study can serve as a foundation for further research. In this multiple case study there were three identified limitations. The first limitation of this study was the small business owners interviewed were only based in the New York City area which is a major urban area. To represent perceptions of those in other states and regions an exploration of other urban areas or rural locations could be done. The study also focused on small business owners that had less than 10 employees so exploring whether the same holds true for medium sized enterprises could be another area of concentration. Lastly, this study was a qualitative study and did not include numerical data. Further research should include other cities, rural locations and countries outside the U.S., medium sized companies as well as a quantitative study to see the impact of gaining and retaining customers through social media marketing strategies.

Reflections

My experience pursing my doctor degree with Walden University proved to be a challenge in changing my mindset from everything I learned as a Master's student. Understanding how to truly conduct research and be a scholarly student with scholarly tone was new and a challenge for me. The attention to detail after reading my study several times and still finding improvements every time humbled me as a writer.

I chose to research social media marketing strategies based on my high interest in social media technologies and desire to have a greater understanding of how small business owners use social media to grow. I gained a new perspective on social media as a marketing tool that could be beneficial for businesses. I remained completely objective

during my study to prevent any bias from my existing knowledge about social media and I focused solely on the participant responses and insights provided by the participants. This allowed me to understand a social media marketing strategy from business owners that had been successful in doing so. Identifying participants who were willing to provide sales data proved to be a challenge however, I believe introducing myself to participants prior to sending email invitations and consent forms was what helped motivate the participants to participate. I am profoundly appreciative of the participants who were willing to share their experiences and documentation with me to explore how small business owners use successful social media strategies to gain and retain customers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how small business owners successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Semistructured interviews were conducted with five small business owners in the New York City area with over five years in business that were successful in using social media strategies to gain and retain customers. I obtained rich data from the interviews using an interview protocol and archived documents from the participants. Through member checking and triangulation, I was able to validate the data from participants. By using analysis methods suggested by Yin, five themes emerged: (1) use of popular social media platforms (2) consistency and timing of posts (3) quality of content (4) maintaining relationships through engagement (5) gaining technical knowledge. I reached data saturation when no new information was gathered. In addition, all themes were correlated to existing literature and the conceptual framework for this study.

The results of this study confirmed that all participants used social media strategies to gain and retain customers. Rogers' DOI theory supports small business owners' adoption of social media could lead to business success. In correlation, Galati et al. (2019) postulated social media offers benefits to small businesses that are an essential part of their success. The use and value of social media has grown substantially over the past decade. Small business owners now have the opportunity to market their businesses through various social media platforms in the same manner as larger sized companies making the playing field level. Not only do small businesses have the opportunity to grow within their own communities, social media marketing makes it possible for them to grow nationally and internationally without having to incur the costs that traditional marketing methods would. The findings of this study may help other small business owners realize the value in using social media as a marketing tool to increase their sales and maintain growth through repeat customers resulting in sustainability beyond five years. The implications for social change include economic prosperity through local employment and spending, community partnerships, philanthropic efforts, environmental efforts, and tax revenues that funnel into the community.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a good example of why small business owners need to start using successful social media strategies because it could make all the difference for the survival of their business. In conclusion, based on the findings of the study social media can lead to successful business growth if small business owners understand the competitive advantage of its use and continue to stay knowledgeable about advances in social media technologies.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview purpose: Data collection on how small business owners successfully use social media strategies to gain and retain customers the social media strategies.

I will be on time for the interview. When the interviewee arrives, I will introduce myself and thank him/her for taking the time to participate in the interview. I will review the purpose of the interview and explain the following terms:

1. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and the interviewee has the right to withdraw at any time.

2. Present the interviewee with the consent form, review the terms, and answer any questions before they sign.

3. Provide a copy of the consent for the interview's record.

4. Review the interview procedures and obtain permission to audio record the interview.

5. Review the timeline for the interview and explain that I will ask 10 open-ended questions, and depending on the length of the response, the interview time should not exceed 30 to 45 minutes, including following up questions.

6. Inform the interviewee that the interview transcripts will be emailed to them for review and confirmation of their responses to ensure that their responses were captured accurately.

7. Listen attentively, take notes, observe them at work, and request any related documentation that they are willing to share.

8. Thank the participants for their time and answer any additional questions that they may have about the research study.

9. Provide my contact information if they additional questions about the study after the interview.

Appendix B: Participant Invitation

<Date>

Dear Sir/Madam,

As part of my doctoral dissertation research at Walden University, I would like to extend an invitation for you to participate in a research study on successful social media strategies that small business owners use to gain and retain customers. I have identified you to participate in my doctoral study because of your professional experience and expertise.

Please be assured that your participation is voluntary and confidential. Enclosed is a consent form. Please review and feel free to ask any questions before acting on this invitation to participate. Your participation depends on satisfying the following criteria: (a) participant be 18 years or older, (b) business owner has less than 10 employees, (c) have been in business at least five years and (d) successfully used social media strategies to gain and retain customers, which could be demonstrated by showing a correlation between an increase in profitability and/or revenue and their social media posting campaign strategies. You will also be asked to help by providing documentation regarding sales reports and social media marketing insights so I can better understand how you are successfully gaining and retaining customers using social media marketing strategies.

If you meet the criteria and you are available to participate, please contact me via email at [redacted] within two weeks of receiving this invite. I will respond promptly to set up a convenient date and time, to conduct a video conference interview via Zoom. Please note that the interview is expected to last between 30-45 minutes and will be audio

recorded with your permission. The interview responses will be transcribed via the TranscribeMe app and will be kept confidential; your personal information will not be revealed. We will then have another 15 min Zoom call so the information gathered from the interview can be reviewed and confirmed for completeness and accuracy.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with any questions. I appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule to consider my request, and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

Brandy McNeil

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you used to successfully utilize social media to gain and retain customers?

2. How many years have you been using social media to gain and retain customers, and what factors or conditions made you start?

3. What are the social media platforms that you use, and what strategies do you use for each one?

4. What measurement strategies do you use to see how many customers you have gained and/or retained?

5. What key challenges did your organization face for implementing each social media platform you use?

6. How did your organization address the key challenges to implementing its strategies for gaining and retaining customers?

7. How do you keep your customers engaged using social media marketing strategies?

8. How do you determine which social media marketing strategies have been most effective for your organization?

9. What other information regarding your organization's social media strategies would you like to share with me?