2021

Competitive Planning Strategies to Sustain an Online Small Business Beyond 5 Years

Dana N. McCall
Walden University

Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Dana N. McCall

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,

and that any and all revisions required by

the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Diane Dusick, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Rocky Dwyer, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Daniel Smith, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2021

Abstract

Competitive Planning Strategies to Sustain an Online Small Business Beyond 5 Years

by

Dana N. McCall

MS, Walden University, 2013

BS, West Chester University, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

November 2021

Abstract

Online businesses have a failure rate of over 50% within the first 5 years of operation. Local politicians and online business leaders are concerned with sustainability to ensure the livelihood of local community members. Grounded in the digital discipline's theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore strategies online small business owners use to sustain their companies beyond 5 years. The participants were five small online business owners in the east coast region of the United States who sustained their companies beyond 5 years. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, company documents, and company social media platforms. The data were analyzed using Yin's 5-step process, and 3 themes emerged: the need for the business to have a social media presence, the need for business owners to develop relevant social media content, and the need for business owners to know their target audience. The key recommendation is for business leaders to develop a strong social media presence with relevant and consistent content targeting their clientele, including videos and interactive sites to engage potential customers, leading to business growth. The study's implications for positive social change include economic growth for families and communities where businesses operate. Online shopping allows for social distancing while sustaining the local economy by supporting some production jobs, keeping delivery services operating, and providing needed goods to consumers who cannot leave their homes.

Competitive Planning Strategies to Sustain an Online Small Business Beyond 5 Years

by

Dana N. McCall

MS, Walden University, 2013

BS, West Chester University, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

September 2021

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my mother, Rosalie Woods. It is because of my

mother that I am a strong and faithful woman, mother, wife, and professional.

Table of Contents

ii

List of Tables

List of Figures

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small business owners represent 99.9% of employers and employ 41.2% of

nongovernment employees (Turner & Endres, 2017). Within the first 5 years, 50% of all

businesses fail (Turner & Endres, 2017). Valuable resources and guidelines contribute to the

success of small business owners and other management professionals (Burns & Dewhurst,

2016). The purpose of the study was to explore the competitive strategies that online small

business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Background of the Problem

The number of online small businesses continues to increase, and the business

environment has become more complex (Turban et al., 2018); however, these entrepreneurs

may fail to properly implement fundamental business and marketing strategies needed for

sustainability (Burns & Dewhurst, 2016). In addition, online business owners are challenged by

how to manage the success of various products and services (Turban et al., 2018). Online

businesses deliver a less personalized customer service experience; customer service

representatives are not physically present while customers shop, and clients are serviced

remotely (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Therefore, online business owners face unique

challenges due to their business structure.

Small online business owners also face challenges in the postsale experience:

warehousing costs, customer loyalty, and postsale customer service (Cheng et al., 2018).

Warehousing costs include renting a space, managing inventory, and hiring warehouse staff

(Balakrishnan et al., 2018). E-commerce business owners struggle to build trust and loyalty with

customers. Because of the virtual nature of online transactions, sellers and buyers do not have the opportunity to get to know one another.

Customer loyalty is won or lost in the postsale phase (Zhou & Duan, 2015). A negative postsale experience damages a company's reputation. There is a relationship between satisfaction level during the postsale period and a customer's decision to buy from the retailer again (Zhou & Duan, 2015). Both online and brick-and-mortar businesses must consider postsale factors and how to effectively execute each component of the postsale experience.

Problem Statement

Small online businesses are becoming increasingly popular (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], 2016), but all small businesses have a high failure rate beyond 5 years (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2016; SBA, 2016). Online businesses have a failure rate of over 50% within the first 5 years of operation (BLS, 2016; SBA, 2016). The general business problem is that online small business owners often lack competitive business strategies. The specific business problem is that some online small business owners lack competitive strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the competitive strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their companies beyond 5 years. The sample of the research included five small online business owners on the east coast who had successfully used business strategies to sustain their companies beyond 5 years. The implications for positive social change include economic growth for the families and communities where the business owners operate. Implications for positive social change include

the potential to encourage online retail business owners to adopt sustainable business practices and create socioeconomic benefits for local communities. Following the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, online shopping allows for social distancing while sustaining the local economy.

Nature of the Study

According to Mertens (2014), researchers use three methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed. The quantitative method is based on correlational, experimental, and quasi-experimental approaches necessary for testing hypotheses. The qualitative method is based on rich textural data, and the mixed method is a combination of the two (Mertens, 2014). A qualitative method was most appropriate for this study because it allowed me to provide a complete, detailed description of the competitive strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The goal was to explore the competitive strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years, which aligned with a qualitative research method, as opposed to a quantitative method, whereby researchers quantify attitudes, behaviors, and other variables and their relationships. Because the quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study, the mixed-method approach was not suitable.

I considered three qualitative designs: phenomenological, ethnographic, and case study. In a phenomenological study, the researcher interviews participants within the context of a phenomenon and draws meaning from their experiences (Mertens, 2014). Phenomenology was not appropriate for this study because I was seeking to uncover new strategies based on the findings. In an ethnographic study, the researcher explores phenomena within a group's culture (Mertens, 2014). The ethnographic design was also not suitable for this study because I was not

exploring the cultural issues of a specific group. Case study researchers seek to address the *what*, *how*, and *why* of an issue under study (Mertens, 2014). The case study design was appropriate for this study in terms of enabling me to discover strategies used by online small business owners to increase their chances of sustainability beyond 5 years.

Research Question

The research question for this study was as follows: What competitive planning strategies do online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Interview Questions

I asked participants in the study to respond to the following questions:

1. What strategies did you use to stay in business beyond 5 years?

2. As an online entrepreneur, based upon your experiences, what strategies lead to profitability?

3. How have you been able to sustain that success in challenging economic periods?

4. What type of strategic planning did you implement during your first 5 years in business?

5. What resources did you use to develop your business strategies?

6. Based upon your organization's experience, how did your small business plan contribute to your business's success?

7. How do you assess the effectiveness of the business strategies you have used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?

8. What else can you add to elaborate on competitive planning strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Conceptual Framework

The digital disciplines theory was developed by Wiersema and Weinman in 2015. Wiersema and Weinman's goal was to find ways for business leaders to incorporate technology to achieve a competitive advantage through customer service, efficient processes, and innovation (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Their theory proposed distinctive customer value and helps further the goal of market leadership in the digital era through four strategies: information excellence, solution leadership, collective intimacy, and accelerated innovation.

Wiersema and Weinman's (2015) purpose was to create a way of using technology to achieve a competitive advantage for virtual and traditional businesses. To improve business success, Wiersema and Weinman introduced these digital strategies to extend the principles of the value disciplines theory to online components. The digital disciplines theory benefits small business owners because its implementation provides them with a competitive framework to sustain their online stores, which was the problem that I addressed in this study.

Operational Definitions

Accelerated innovation: Accelerated innovation is a process that enhances the traditional business improvement process using networks to improve products, processes, and relationships (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

Audience: Refers to the type of customers targeted for a product or service. The customer type is based on common characteristics of like demographics and behaviors (Newberry, 2020).

Collective intimacy: Collective intimacy is the inclusion of analytics that produce a personalized customer experience through online personalized recommendations, services, and so on (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

Social media content: Social media content refers to communicating information on a social media platform through the use of text, videos, and educational posts to appeal to a business's target audience in a positive way (Anaya et al., 2020).

Customer intimacy: Customer intimacy derives from a variety of unique services available to help serve targeted customers (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Zacharias et al., 2016).

Digital online lists: Digital online lists are services offered by online retailers that allow customers to compile a list of items that they intend to purchase, wish to purchase, or want others to purchase for them (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019).

Information excellence: Information excellence includes components of operational excellence, which include the addition of automation, data analytics, and algorithms to incorporate both digital and brick-and-mortar businesses (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

Mobile application option(s): Mobile application option involves buying with the use of software designed for smartphones, tablets, and computers (Ryu et al., 2019). The application is downloaded from the business owner's distribution channel.

Omnichannel approach: The omnichannel approach is an approach used by business owners to integrate different shopping options for customers, such as mobile application, in store, or via a website (Ryu et al., 2019).

Operational excellence: Operational excellence is a seamless and cost-efficient service experience (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995).

Product leadership: Product leadership is a company's ability to lead in product development in the industry in which it operates (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995).

Social media interaction: The initial communication of information and response to information using a social media platform through the use of words, videos, educational posts, and direct marketing posts to a business's target audience.

Solution leadership: Solution leadership includes components of product leadership with the addition of various ecosystems such as cloud services and social networks that contribute to the online customer service experience (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are claims that researchers posit to be true but cannot verify (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, the first assumption was that there were small business leaders on the east coast who had successfully led organizations to profitability beyond 5 years and who were willing to participate in the study. The second assumption was that the participants would be truthful when responding to the interview questions. The third assumption was that the selected interview questions would produce sufficient data to address the general research question. Finally, the fourth assumption was that participants would allow themselves sufficient time to provide detailed answers.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a study that could affect its findings (Utian & Maamari, 2014). A potential limitation was the reliance on a small sample of successful small

business owners for knowledge, honesty, and experience. In addition, the results of the study were limited by the honesty and thoroughness of the participants' responses. Finally, the participants' availability to respond to interview questions in sufficient detail may have limited the results of the study.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries that researchers impose to establish the scope of a study (Ody-Brasier & Vermeulen, 2014). This study included online small business owners who had been in business for over 5 years with fewer than 500 employees. Medium and large-sized companies were not included in this study. The study was delimited to the geographic location of Richmond, Virginia.

Significance of the Study

The study results may provide information to online small business owners on increasing their success rate beyond 5 years. Small business executives must adopt innovative strategies to sustain and increase business success (Mazzei et al., 2016). Because online small business owners often lack competitive strategies and their companies often fail within 5 years, the results of the study may provide them with effective strategies to sustain their operations beyond this term.

The study's implications for positive social change include economic growth for the families and communities where the business owners operate. Small business owners strive to contribute to the economy as a whole, and their gains may also positively affect the employment rate because the success of businesses in a geographic area strongly influences the economic conditions of residents (Dunn & Liang, 2011). Providing online small business owners

with the tools for independent success could create economic growth opportunities and promote a healthier business environment. Following the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, online shopping allowed for social distancing while sustaining local economies by supporting some production jobs, keeping delivery services operating, and providing needed goods to consumers who might be unable to leave their homes.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section includes a review of the literature to establish a foundational understanding of the competitive strategies that small online retail business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. For this review, I used the following sources: (a) scholarly peer-reviewed articles, (b) small business reviews, (c) publications related to the research topic, and (d) government reports. The primary terms that I used in the search were (a) *strategies*, (b) *brick and mortar*, (c) *business skills*, (d) *online small business owners*, (e) *Small Business Administration* and *SBA*, (f) *qualitative research*, (g) *business success*, and (h) *qualitative case study*. I reviewed relevant literature to support my research question and the method and design of the study. This literature review includes six major topics: (a) the digital disciplines, (b) Porter's five forces theory, (c) Tracey and Wiersema's value disciplines, (d) online versus brick-and-mortar businesses, (e) challenges faced by online stores, (f) best practices for small online business success, (g) benefits and opportunities for online stores, (h) pandemics, (i) cost of a pandemic, and (j) online shopping during a pandemic.

The Digital Disciplines

The digital disciplines theory was developed by Wiersema and Weinman in 2015. The authors' purpose was to create a way to use technology to achieve a competitive advantage for

virtual and traditional businesses. Business owners can achieve a competitive advantage through customer service, efficient processes, and innovation. Popien (2017) referenced the digital disciplines, finding that their use is one of many methods that can be used to drive outcomes for an online business. Popien (2017) used the digital disciplines as a framework to drive digital business outcomes. Weinman (2018) found that the digital disciplines could create customer value, enhance business strategy, and allow the use of information technology to further business success. The digital disciplines provide a structured approach for business owners to differentiate themselves from competitors in the digital environment.

Wiersema and Weinman (2015) introduced the digital disciplines as an extension of the value disciplines to incorporate the online components for businesses success. They provided four strategies that create distinctive customer value: *information excellence*, *solution leadership*, *collective intimacy*, and *accelerated innovation*. These four strategies extend Wiersema and Weinman's framework with a goal of market leadership in the digital era.

Information excellence includes all components of operational excellence with the addition of automation, data analytics, and algorithms to incorporate digital and brick-and-mortar businesses (Bauer et al., 2019). The digital space contains a virtual component that is added to the operation of a business. Retailers have access to a large amount of data that can be used to operate efficiently. With the enhancement of technology, data are now available to business owners. Technology enhancements provide them with a benefit when making strategic decisions to operate efficiently and remain competitive. Del (2018) demonstrated that the use of data in the shipping business improved efficiency through the use of technology that produced condition-based notifications for maintenance, to prevent system failure, and to

increase productivity. The use of technology when seeking operational excellence is also

beneficial when business owners adopt the omnichannel approach to enhancing the shopping

experience through both online and brick-and-mortar avenues. The use of information

technology enables business owners using the omnichannel approach to integrate different

shopping options for customers, allowing the latter to choose the mode that suits their needs

and preferences (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019).

Solution leadership includes all components of product leadership with the addition of

various ecosystems such as cloud services and social networks that contribute to the online

customer service experience (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). The need for solutions starts at the

creation of a business. The structure of and approach to successfully sustaining a business are

derived from the decisions made by leadership. Creating an innovation framework and structure

is a factor that is beneficial at all stages of the business process (Pietraszewski, 2019). An

innovative framework can be in the form of a group, knowledge sharing, and so on.

Pietraszewski (2019) hypothesized that coordination and cooperation of strong groups by

leaders is a component of success for business owners. The creation of these groups generates

more efficient ways to solve problems as opposed to one person addressing them on their own

(Pietraszewski, 2019). Pietraszewski found through conceptualizing leadership and fellowship

roles that both roles serve as vehicles for processing and challenging information. Information is

updated and distributed through various outlets such as social media and blogs. To provide

solutions to all aspects of the business operation, innovation, and sustainability strategies,

leaders should develop teams and structures that encourage collaboration and learning

(Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

Collective intimacy includes analytics that produce an online, personalized customer experience through tailored recommendations and services (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Technology has become a resource for successfully operating online businesses (Schiemann et al., 2017). Online businesses require resources for daily operation in the same way as traditional brick-and-mortar premises. Online business owners use technology for processes such as data analytics to develop strategies for understanding customer behavior, forecasting profit, and determining needed resources (Schiemann et al., 2017).

The online business retail experience does not include a face-to-face component as with brick-and-mortar stores. A benefit of using technology is that certain information that would traditionally be captured in the point-of-sale portion of the face-to-face sales process through conversation with an assistant is captured digitally with each transaction. This information is used as a basis for a more customized online client experience (Schiemann et al., 2017). With a drawback of the online retail experience being the absence of face-to-face interaction, tracking customer behavior to personalized recommendations helps counter this disadvantage. Information excellence includes more than providing accurate customer information. It includes information based on customer behavior, interaction, and market trends to simplify, personalize, and enhance the client experience.

Accelerated innovation enhances traditional innovation with the use of innovative networks to improve products, processes, and relationships (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). The introduction of the online world produced an environment of rapid change. In such an arena, business owners should implement a structure for continuous innovation to remain successful. Zhan et al. (2018) found that components associated with accelerated innovation in high-tech

industries are a collaborative structure, customer feedback and involvement, and an environment that fosters innovation. Online businesses often post customer feedback online, and social media networks have simplified the collaborative environment. Therefore, it is now up to the business owner to foster an environment that encourages innovation based on all the resources available. These strategies should be used by business owners who seek to gain market leadership though a differentiated customer experience in the digital era.

Treacy and Wiersema's Value Disciplines

I also considered the value disciplines model, which Treacy and Wiersema developed in 1995. This model builds on the foundation of Porter's five forces theory (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Zacharias et al., 2016), and although the two share similarities, Porter focused on broad strategies for competition and sustainability. Tracey and Wiersema focused only on disciplines that help business owners differentiate themselves from their competition based on the client experience (Weinman, 2015). In addition, Treacy and Wiersema's framework was primarily based on traditional brick-and-mortar businesses (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

The three value disciplines are customer intimacy, operational excellence, and product leadership. *Customer intimacy* is demonstrated by having a variety of unique services available to help serve targeted customers (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Zacharias et al., 2016). The goal of implementing customer intimacy is to create a unique brand experience for the company (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). The benefit of customer intimacy is increased customer loyalty, which is based on the owner's ability to effectively manage the customer service experience throughout the sales process and into the postsale experience (Chen et al., 2018).

Business owners demonstrate *operational excellence* through a seamless and cost-efficient service experience (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). Rising costs associated with warehousing are a challenge for online business owners and include renting a space, managing inventory, and hiring warehouse staff (Balakrishnan et al., 2018). The challenges that small online business owners face in the postsale experience are warehousing costs, customer loyalty, and the postsale customer service experience (Chen et al., 2018). Thus, achieving operational excellence is a component of successfully sustaining a business.

Product leadership is defined by a company's ability to lead in product development in the industry in which it operates (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). Business owners should keep these components in mind when budgeting to ensure that resources are allocated appropriately and that the company will be successful in each area.

Researchers use this theory as a foundation for studies on creating distinct customer value. Treacy and Wiersema's framework was the foundation of a study by Bauer et al. (2019), who used it to determine the value of blockchain technology to the car ecosystem and to create district shareholder groups. Bauer et al. found that blockchain technology created value by forming guidelines for businesses to leverage and successfully implement this technology to create value through innovation, controlling customer intimacy (Bauer et al., 2019). In addition, Gellweiler (2019) used Treacy and Wiersema's framework to uncover the values of customers, finding that information technology vendors focused on operational excellence when implementing the value disciplines. Vendors also focused on buyer competitiveness (Gellweiler, 2019). The focus of both studies was on using the framework to understand customer values with a view to enhancing the customer service experience.

The model can provide business owners with the tools to be competitive after sustainability has been achieved (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Zacharias et al., 2016). To be successful when using this model, business owners must do well in all three areas. Understanding the three components of the value disciplines model is required for its successful implementation. Researchers use this theory as a foundation for studies on creating distinct customer value. However, for this study, online, foundational, and sustainability strategies were needed.

Porter's Five Forces Theory

I also considered Porter's five forces theory. Michael Porter developed the theory in 1980. The goal of this model is to develop a competitive strategy for business success based on five forces:

- competition in the industry,

- potential of new entrants into the industry,

- power of suppliers,

- power of customers, and

- the threat of substitute products (Porter, 1980; Sanfelice, 2014).

Porter (1980) defined the components that he considered necessary to successfully implement the framework. *Competition in the industry* refers to a component used by business owners to determine competitors' ability to take business from other companies within the same industry (Mathooko & Ogutu, 2015; Porter, 1980). *Potential of new entrants into the industry* refers to the ease with which a new company can enter an industry (Porter, 1980). *Power of suppliers* is the component used by business owners to

measure the level of influence that suppliers have on the industry based on the number of

buyers and their bargaining power (Porter, 1980). *Power of customers* is the level of

influence that customers have to control prices, which is based on their ability to bargain

and the number of alternatives in the industry (Porter, 1980). *The threat of substitute*

products refers to the products or services that are similar to or can replace the product or

service offered within a particular industry (Porter, 1980).

Porter's five forces theory provides small business owners with ways to develop

foundational strategies for sustainability through the use of the five components. This approach

can also provide owners with a competitive framework for sustainability (Mukherjee, 2018).

However, this theory lacks strategies related to the digital era, which were required for this

study.

Online Versus Brick-and-Mortar Businesses

Online businesses experience both benefits and challenges compared to brick-and-

mortar businesses, largely due to their differing operational environments. The use of online

distribution channels allows retailers to reach a range of new customers. Using online

distribution channels also provides a competitive advantage over retailers who operate only

brick-and-mortar locations (Arya & Middendorf, 2018; Turner & Endres, 2017). With a brick-and-

mortar business, physical entry results in the retailer collecting sales taxes earlier and paying

higher startup costs, affecting prices and triggering customers' price sensitivity (Turner &

Endres, 2017). The advantage of exposure to a wider range of customers combined with lower

overhead costs gives online retailers an initial profit advantage.

Customers' ability to access stores is another component separating brick-and-mortar businesses from online stores. Brick-and-mortar businesses have physical storefronts from which to sell products and services (Mazzei et al., 2016; Ryu et al., 2019), whereas online retailers do not have this advantage. Instead, online retailers sell products through websites and virtual shopping carts. After customers place an order, the retailer then mails them the purchased goods. Thus, although online retailers do not have shop front overhead, they do have warehouse costs associated with providing goods and services to clients (Simmons et al., 2014; Yong & Hassan, 2019). However, brick-and-mortar stores have the advantage of allowing customers to physically enter locations; online stores have the advantage of convenience (Simmons et al., 2014; Yong & Hassan, 2019). As long as online buyers have functional electronic devices and internet access, they can view and purchase products from practically anywhere.

The ease of conducting business with a retailer is another determining factor when customers consider whether to purchase online or from a brick-and-mortar store. Brick-and-mortar retailers provide onsite customer service, which offers customers the advantage of speaking to a person face to face rather than through email or over the phone (Ryu et al., 2019; Simmons et al., 2014; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Online businesses deliver a less personalized customer service experience; customer service representatives are not physically present while customers shop and clients are serviced remotely (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Brick-and-mortar retailers implement traditional sales approaches, such as the use of salespeople and sales events to attract business; they often struggle to effectively use an omni-channel approach to sell their goods and services. The omni-channel approach is a sales method in which a business owner provides customers with an enhanced shopping experience through any channel

(Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). In this strategy, customers will be able to have a seamless experience however they shop because there is integration among distribution, promotion, and communication channels on the back end (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Business owners use the omni-channel approach to integrate different shopping options for customers, allowing them to choose the mode that suits their needs and preferences (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Online stores accept multiple payment options including credit cards and services such as PayPal and tend to have more omni-channel opportunities, such as mobile application options (e.g., Amazon wish lists and "Loved" eBay listings) and digital online lists (Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). However, both business types accept similar payment methods and use both traditional and novel ways of advertising. Online businesses are frequently more successful with omni-channel approaches and online advertising; to compete, brick-and-mortar businesses have now begun to offer in-store and online purchase options.

Initial startup and marketing costs differ between brick-and-mortar and online businesses. Brick-and-mortar stores' initial costs are higher, leading many retailers to start online businesses; however, after the initial growth period, costs often increase for online businesses, especially in the areas of shipping and return expenses, costs of new customer acquisition, cost of customer loss, and expenses for increasingly pricey web hosting (Alalwan, 2018; Ryu et al., 2019; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Brick-and-mortar retailers typically rely on traditional forms of advertising, such as television and radio commercials, newspapers, and billboards; however, brick-and-mortar business owners are beginning to take advantage of available online advertising, which can be more effective than traditional methods.

Social media marketing is a process that allows business owners to present their

companies' websites, products, and services through online social channels to a large

community and to gain rapid feedback from that community (Yong & Hassan, 2019). Business

owners can create strong relationships through this type of marketing communication, which is

not possible through traditional advertising channels (Yong & Hassan, 2019). Business owners

try to identify ways in which their firms can make profitable use of applications such as

YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. Adapting some form of online marketing through social media

is vital for all businesses, whether in person or online (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019).

Small online business owners should use social media when developing their marketing strategy.

Social media has an impact on the handicrafts and fashion industries, in which trends

cycle rapidly. In the fashion industry, marketing communication using social media can be an

extremely effective way to promote a brand (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). For

example, traditional designers may provide live broadcasts of their fashion shows on blogs and

websites (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Having an effective website is not necessarily a

guarantee of success (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). The marketing firm and the

company's back office must also be effective for social media marketing efforts to successfully

increase customer engagement and purchasing intention.

Business owners have increased their use of social media to conduct marketing and

advertising (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Specifically, they are increasingly using

technology from the sales perspective through conversations with customers (Alalwan, 2018;

Yong & Hassan, 2019). Businesses' use of social media sites can improve customer awareness

and inquiries, enhance relationships with customers, and increase new customer acquisition

(Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Social media also enhances businesses' local and global

performance, improving their ability to reach customers on an international level and promoting

and improving perceptions of local businesses(Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). In pursuit

of these and other advantages, business owners are dedicating more resources to social media

ads (Alalwan, 2018; Chen et al., 2018). Although costs for an online business typically rise as the

business grows, there is an initial cost-benefit over brick-and-mortar businesses for business

owners who do not have much available startup capital. With the popularity of social media and

the increase in the number of businesses taking advantage of online platforms, online marketing

has become a dominant mode, and it has become a more effective outreach method for all

retailers. There are unknown factors and limitations to social media advertising, such as

customer attraction and the presence of nondigital customers (Alalwan, 2018).

Social media is an advertising tool used to reach large audiences at low cost. To be

successful with social media advertising, business owners should develop advanced knowledge

of social media advertising tools and virtual advertising functionality (Alalwan, 2018; Chen et al.,

2018). Online business owners must know their audience and devote sufficient resources to the

outreach effort. Although social media allows businesses to reach a more targeted audience at a

lower cost than through traditional advertising, small business owners will share ad space with

business owners that have much larger budgets (Alalwan, 2018; Chen et al., 2018). Thus, small

business owners must implement savvy advertising campaigns when competing with larger

companies and prioritize the quality of the advertisements over the quantity.

Online and brick-and-mortar businesses have key differences that create both

advantages and disadvantages over a company's life span. Key differences include the entry

point of doing business with the retailer, the ease of doing business, the marketing strategy, and

the costs of doing business (Simmons et al., 2014). With the rise of social media and online

platforms, businesses have created a push for digital marketing and advertising. Although each

type of business has advantages and disadvantages, online businesses have grown faster

because of the current digital environment and the initial cost savings associated with starting

an online business.

Challenges of Small Online Businesses

Success in achieving customer loyalty is based on the owner's ability to effectively

manage the customer service experience throughout the sales funnel, and into the postsale

experience. The postsale experience consists of all activities that follow an online transaction,

such as shipping and warehousing (Chen et al., 2018). The challenges that small online business

owners face in the postsale experience are warehousing costs, customer loyalty, and the

postsale customer service experience (Chen et al., 2018).

The rising costs associated with warehousing are another challenge for online business

owners. Warehousing costs include renting a space, managing inventory, and hiring warehouse

staff (Balakrishnan et al., 2018). If online business owners want to minimize their business

expenditures, they must consider business models that do not involve a warehouse. There are

increasingly popular models that do not require warehousing costs (Balakrishnan et al, 2018;

Cheng et al., 2018):

- Affiliate online store: This is an online business model in which a company or

  individual promotes products and earns commission fees on items purchased by

  consumers (Balakrishnan et al., 2018).

- 3PL: This business model involves working with a third-party logistics company (3PL) that handles the storage and delivery of products (Balakrishnan et al., 2018).

- Drop-shipping: In this model, the business owner directs customer orders to a wholesale supplier, which ships products directly to the customer. (Balakrishnan et al., 2018).

If online business owners want to invest in warehousing, it should be factored into the overall operational budget. E-commerce business owners struggle to build trust and loyalty with customers. Because of the virtual nature of online transactions, sellers and buyers do not have the opportunity to get to know one another. Repeat transactions, in addition to company time and effort spent on consumer outreach, can help build customer trust and loyalty (Chen et al., 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Customer loyalty is the result of effective customer service.

Customer loyalty is won or lost in the postsale experience (Zhou & Duan, 2015). A negative postsale experience damages the company's reputation. There is a relationship between satisfaction level during the postsale experience and a customer's decision to buy from the retailer again (Zhou & Duan, 2015). Both online and brick-and-mortar businesses must consider postsale factors, and effectively executing each component of the postsale experience.

Warehousing costs, customer loyalty, and the postsale customer service experience are challenges that online small business owners face. Traditional brick-and-mortar stores do not offer the convenience of shipping items directly to customers; however, transaction-processing delays for brick-and-mortar stores are typically resolved in a matter of hours, whereas such delays may take online stores days or weeks to resolve. Therefore, the postsale process is critical in achieving customer loyalty.

Best Practices for Small Online Business Success

Numerous factors contribute to the potential success of online businesses. Successful

business owners demonstrate expertise regarding their industries and their customers'

expectations (Simmons et al., 2014). Expertise alone does not lead to online business success;

the fundamental strategies that contribute to online business success are online sustainability

disclosures, competitive prices, and product quality (Mazzei et al., 2016).

A sustainability disclosure is a company report that provides information about the

company's economic, environmental, and social performance (Amran et al., & Devi, 2015).

Sustainability disclosures help company leaders develop tools and resources that will help them

succeed (Amran et al., 2015). Furthermore, key performance indicators (KPIs) are embedded

within a sustainability disclosure; KPIs are critical measures of progress toward the company's

goals and provide business owners with measurable tools to effectively gauge progress.

Business owners use KPIs to create a focus for achieving strategic and operational improvement,

engaging in decision-making, and paying attention to the areas that matter most (Kontar et al.,

2017).

Competitive pricing refers to pricing a product in accordance with what the competition

charges (Chen et al., 2018). Competitive pricing is one of the four major pricing strategies

adopted by most companies (Faith & Agwu, 2018). Other commonly used pricing strategies are

- Cost-plus pricing - A price based on total cost of the product plus a predetermined

  markup.

- Value-based price - Pricing based on the customer usefulness appraisal.

- Price skimming - Pricing products or services high and adjusting it lower over time.

- Penetration pricing - Pricing products or services low and adjusting it over time (Bdc, 2019).

Business owners must consider costs, competition, and price sensitivity when determining their pricing strategies (Faith & Agwu, 2018). Online business owners also have to consider pricing that covers their startup costs. To establish the right competitive prices for their products, businesses owners' need to account for the product life cycle and the stage the product is in (Ayanso & Lertwachara, 2018; Chen et al., 2018; Faith & Agwu, 2018). If a business belongs to a market with a high number of substitutes and competitors, the actions of competitors are an important factor driving a product's price.

The quality of the products offered must be superior or the price lower for customers to buy products online rather than in a store. Small online business owners compete with other online businesses, as well as brick-and-mortar stores. High-quality products will lead to positive customer evaluations, which are crucial for generating sales online. Online evaluations are one of the most effective and important innovations in measuring product quality and can provide a competitive advantage over other distributors in the business sector (Gössling, Hall, & Andersson, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Just as for brick-and-mortar stores, reputation is a key determinant for the economic success of online stores (Gössling et al., 2018; Rami, Antonia et al., 2018). Customers value transparency and must trust the company from which they buy. Furthermore, customer evaluations establish the foundation of a company's reputation. Corporate practices and policies, particularly when outlined in a sustainability disclosure and then implemented in practice, serve as an initial indicator of company values, and customer evaluations shape the consumers' perspective.

In summary, successful business owners deploy resources and expertise in crafting clear sustainability disclosures, setting competitive prices, and ensuring product quality. Sustainability disclosures help to provide small business owners with tools and resources for success. These disclosures include the performance indicators that provide business owners with concrete information that allows them to effectively gauge their progress over time. Small business owners often implement competitive pricing—that is, pricing a product in accordance with what their competition charges. Products sold online must be superior in quality to or lower in price than those sold in a physical store for customers to buy them. To succeed in the 21st century market, small online business owners must offer both high-quality products and excellent customer service. Quality products and responsive customer service will lead to positive customer evaluations, which are among the most effective ways for businesses to generate social approval and attract new customers. The ultimate outcome is a competitive advantage over other distributors.

Best practices for small business owners are evolving as the functionality of online technology advances. As online technology changes, the communication, marketing, and sales options for online retailers change as well. Online business owners should develop a strategy to focus on understanding such technological advancements so that sales are not affected. Advancements in technology can benefit online business owners if they use them effectively.

Benefits of and Opportunities for Online Stores

The number of online small business owners has increased because of the benefits associated with operating online stores, which include low start-up costs, exposure to new sales channels, and the flexibility to allow customers to place orders from anywhere with internet

access (Arya & Mittendorf, 2018; Chopra, 2016; Turner & Endres, 2017). Traditional brick-and-mortar business owners who have opened online stores typically see an increase in their business (Chopra, 2016). As the use of online platforms increases, the need for an online business presence will also increase.

Small business owners generally recognize that online small business ownership start-up costs are lower than those of other types of businesses (Chopra, 2016). For an online small business, the initial cost of a professional website, products, and required licenses may be considerable, but this cost is significantly less than that of a traditional store (Arya & Mittendorf, 2018; Chopra, 2016; Turner & Endres, 2017). Online businesses often require lower startup costs compared to brick-and-mortar stores. The cost to develop a website can cost up to 5,000 for a basic informational site or even hundreds of thousands of dollars for a customizable online marketplace (Chen et al., 2018). For example, online business owners starting a business on Etsy will incur lower startup costs than a jeweler looking to open a physical store (Chopra, 2016; Arya & Mittendorf). An online business owner's costs will be lower when compared to the startup costs for the same type of business in a retail location.

Online exposure provides increased website traffic. Online traffic consists of site visitors, who are considered leads (Ledford, 2015). These leads have the potential to turn into customers who will purchase products or services (Ledford, 2015). However, the creation of an online business alone will not generate this type of traffic. Search engine optimization (SEO) can help optimize one's web presence, so search engines will recognize the site (Ledford, 2015). As a result, more potential customers will view the online business (Arya & Mittendorf, 2018; Chopra, 2016). This is a component to maintaining an online business because competitors likely

already have an SEO strategy in place. SEO is a necessity when seeking online exposure for a

small business.

SEO involves the use of technology to increase accessibility, uses words that people type

into search engines, and produce and enhance customer experience with high-quality, expert

content that helps answer the user's query (Ledford, 2015; Roesler, 2019). SEO is the use of

rankings in the algorithmic search engine to increase chance targeted customer to a website

(Ledford, 2015). For example, Google receives almost 95% of clicks on results that appear on the

top of the results page (Roesler, 2019). Google uses over 200 signals to score its search results,

and SEO influences the process for an improved signal (Roesler, 2019). When online small

business owners seek to implement SEO strategies, they leverage various techniques that other

business have successfully implemented, including

- Owning your own domain and hosting: Google recommends websites that it

    considers reliable.

- Using original content creation: Content should be relevant. Customers look for

    solutions to their problems. Successful content is shared widely, and Google will

    move your website up in rankings if people find your content helpful and original.

    Content can be in an array of formats: videos, photos, tools, and plug-ins. You can

    opt for one or all of these options.

- Creating relevant and natural backlinks: Backlinks are links that lead to your site

    from another domain. Backlinks are ranked by their popularity with customers.

- Using social media: For both traffic building and SEO, a strong social media presence is essential because Google now considers a website's social media presence a key factor in its relevance and influence.

- Optimizing your theme: SEO of themes allows search engines to understand the efficacy of a site. The use of optimizing can offer a pleasing experience for visitors and a website that loads quickly. Make sure that all links work properly. The theme should be easy to use and navigate. While the available template themes often work well, a custom-designed template will enable your website and brand to stand out from your competitors (Ledford, 2015).

Online shopping options provide enhanced flexibility to retail customers. Enhance flexibility can increase revenues for online business owners. Customers want the best possible online-shopping experience, but what constitutes a good e-commerce experience varies from person to person (Chen et al., 2018). By providing flexible options and making information easy to find, small business owners can increase their e-commerce sales.

Online shopping provides buyers the opportunity to shop at any time. Shopping online saves time because orders are processed instantly, and buyers do not have to call the cashier or store employees to inquire about certain items (Chopra, 2016). Shopping online also allows buyers to compare prices. Comparing prices and getting the best deal are the main benefits of online buying; besides saving time, you also save on gas and parking (Chopra, 2016). Some buyers can also save money on taxes; online shops collect only sales tax.

With so many online stores available, shoppers have many options when buying online. Online stores are usually well-stocked, and there are more colors and sizes to choose from;

many online stores offer free shipping (Chopra, 2016). Some online shops give shoppers the option to order out-of-stock merchandise and ship it to you when it comes in. Also, shoppers may be able to ship your purchase directly to someone else as a gift.

Pandemics

In March and April of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak familiarized people across the world with the effects of a pandemic. A pandemic is defined as an outbreak of a disease that can spread globally (Baker et al., 2020), often as the result of a new virus that has no cure. Coronavirus is not the first pandemic the United States has experienced (Baker et al., 2020). To prepare for future pandemics, online small business owners must understand the past.

Pandemics have affected the world in the past, including the 1918 global influenza outbreak that spread across the world. This pandemic was the deadliest of the century, infecting 500 million, killing 50 million (Hong & Yun, 2017) and caused a decrease in educational attainment in areas that were severely affected by the pandemic (Hong & Yun, 2017). In 2006, the flu was declared a pandemic, and its economic effects included employees missing days at work.

A pandemic cost people more than their health, and the effects extend to the economy. The costs associated with the 2020 coronavirus pandemic have been related to health, lives lost, medical costs for testing and treatment, sick leave pay, and debt relief for those who are out of work due to mandatory business closures and stay at home orders (Nersisyan & Wray, 2020). The 2006 flu pandemic affected the economy in the form of employees missing days at work. A .42% increase in days missed per person during the 2009 peak winter months represented an 800% increase in comparison to average winter months (Duarte et al., 2017).

The costs associated with a pandemic relate to health, in the form of sickness and death, and to economics, in the form of medical and sick leave debt relief for families, the cost of treatment and testing, and business closures which increase unemployment and decrease consumer spending (Chen et al., 2020). This pandemic has also impacted education and degree attainment (Chen et al., 2020). During a pandemic, household spending habits change. In the initial stages, consumers increase their spending habits and focus on credit card debt, retail, and food. This is then followed by a decline in overall spending (Baker et al., 2020). The effects of this decrease have been associated with stay-at-home orders and social distancing (Baker et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2020).

Online Shopping During a Pandemic

As the coronavirus spread quickly across the United States in March and April 2020, mandated stay-at-home orders forced many businesses to shut down. These changes affected consumer spending. Baker et al. (2020) analyzed the trends in retail, restaurant, air travel, food delivery, public transit, and credit card spending between January and March of 2020. As the number of people infected with coronavirus grew, consumer spending increased in retail, credit card spending, and food items (Petro, 2020). While spending in necessities increased, retail spending in nonessential areas sharply decreased (Petro, 2020). Online food delivery services such Instacart, Amazon Fresh, Shipt, Walmart, and Peapod have become more popular during the pandemic (Wati, 2020). Baker et al. (2020) discussed consumption based on household spending measured by daily spending in dollars (Baker et al., 2020). There was a sharp downward trend across retail, restaurant, air travel, transit, food delivery, and credit card spending. However, food delivery spending declined at a slower rate (Baker et al., 2020). Baker

et al. (2020) found that the need for online shopping and delivery increased as stay-at-home

orders continued to be extended. The increase was so sharp that it was challenging for stores to

keep up with demand.

The overall decline in retail spending affected online shopping. The concern for safety

rose, which resulted in an increase in the consumption of staple goods such as food and home

necessities (Baker et al., 2020; Shearman, 2020). Fear associated with the scarcity of necessities

drove an increase in retail grocery store consumption. According to the Census Bureau (2020),

overall retail spending was down 16.4%, and retail saw a 6.2% decline in sales. Despite an

overall drop in retail sales, the sale of general goods increased (National Retail Federation,

2020). According to the National Retail Federation, the stay-at-home order also caused a decline

in gasoline sales. This drop in retail sales was greater than the 4.8% drop during the 2008

recession (National Retail Federation, 2020). Overall retail and online sales declined.

The extension of stay-at-home orders through April caused a change in consumers'

online spending habits (Petro, 2020). Petro (2020) examined the behavior of online retail

shoppers during the month of April, 2020. According to the results of a survey on the spending

behaviors of 500 people at the start of the pandemic, 30% of men and women said that they

chose to shop online rather than in brick and mortar stores (Petro, 2020). Overall, 24% of men

and 18% of women increased their use of online shopping (Petro, 2020). During the pandemic,

consumers noted changes in the following areas: (a) 31% of men and 28% of women used online

and pick up in store services, (b) 22% of men and 15% of women used curbside pickup services,

and (c) 18% of men and 16% of women used subscription services. Even though men and

women altered their behavior at different rates during the pandemic, the trend in the use of online shopping consistently increased as stay-at-home orders remained in place.

As the coronavirus continued to spread and stay-at-home orders caused businesses to shut down, more people shopped online to alleviate their concerns about gathering in public. The early stages of the pandemic saw changes to consumer spending and an overall decline in retail spending that have affected online shopping**.** Along with increasing safety concerns, there was an increase in the purchase of staple goods such as food and home necessities. As stay-at-home orders continued, customers increased their online spending and generated more revenue for online business owners.

Transition

Section 1 of this proposal includes the concepts, concerns, and obstacles relating to the business problem that prompted this study. The purpose of this doctoral study is to explore strategies online small-business owners use to sustain a business beyond 5 years. The research question guiding this doctoral study is, what strategies do online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? The following were the main topics within the literature review: (a) the digital disciplines, (b) Treacy and Wiersema's value disciplines, (c) Porter's five forces theory, (d) online verses brick and mortar businesses, (e) challenges of small online businesses, (f) best practices for small online business success, (g) benefit and opportunities for online stores, (h) pandemics, (i), cost of a pandemic, and (j) online shopping during a pandemic. This literature review indicated a need for further study of the strategies required to sustain a business beyond 5 years. The objective of this doctoral study was to explore the strategies small-business leaders use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. To explore this topic, I

interviewed a sample of five small-business owners on the east coast with one to five

employees.

The data from this study might contribute to improving business owners' overall outlook

for their future and their economic status. The results of this study could contribute to social

change by providing strategies for overcoming sustainability barriers preventing the success of

business owners beyond 5 years. The contributions could assist in the success rate of small

businesses. The shift could result in improving the business owners' overall outlook for their

future and improve their economic and financial status.

Section 2 addresses (a) the role of the researcher, (b) participants, (c) methodology, (d)

design, (e) population and sample, (f) ethical adherence, (g) data collection, (h) collection

technique, (i) analysis, (j) reliability, validity, and instruments used, and (k) a transition. Section 3

begins with (a) the purpose of the study, (b) a restating of the research question, (c) a

presentation of the findings, (d) application to the real-world setting, (e) implications for social

change, (f) recommendations for action, (g) recommendations for future study, and (h)

reflections.

Section 2: The Project

The objective of this study was to explore the competitive strategies that online small

business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. In Section 2, I present an

explanation of my methodology and research design. Section 2 also includes the (a) purpose of

the study, (b) role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method, (e) research design,

(f) population and sampling, (g) ethical considerations, (h) data collection instrument, (i) data

collection technique, (j) data organization, (k) data analysis, and (l) reliability and validity.

Purpose Statement

Small online businesses are becoming increasingly popular (SBA, 2016), but all small

businesses have a high failure rate beyond 5 years (BLS, 2016; SBA, 2016). Online businesses

have a failure rate of greater than 50% within the first 5 years of operation (BLS, 2016; SBA,

2016). The general business problem is that online small business owners often lack competitive

business strategies. The specific business problem is that some online small business owners

lack competitive strategies to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years.

Role of the Researcher

In this study, I used the qualitative research method in performing data collection,

reviewing the data, and reporting findings (Souders, 2020). It is the responsibility of the

researcher to reduce personal bias by reporting any outside connection to the research. My

connection to the research was that I am a financial professional. However, I do not currently

own or operate an online retail business, although I have operated an online small business in

the past. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to ensure ethical behavior to protect the

participants (Wick, 2017). In this study, I took the following steps to ensure ethical behavior

toward the participants: (a) reviewing the risks and benefits to determine the appropriateness

of the research, (b) adhering to the guidelines for selecting human subjects for participation, (c)

providing informed consent to participants, and (d) complying with the standards of Walden

University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). As the primary researcher for this study, my role

was to focus on creating an unbiased environment. Although it is not possible to eliminate all

bias, techniques such as member checking, an outline data collection process, and triangulation

can reduce it (Reilly, 2013). I had not worked with any of the participants prior to this study.

The role of the researcher includes upholding the ethical guidelines of the Belmont

Report. The Belmont Report requirements provide for ethical protection for people,

beneficence, and justice in research involving human subjects (Belmont Report, 1979).

Participation of people is voluntary, and they can decline to participate at any time (Belmont

Report, 1979). Beneficence is defined as maximizing benefits and reducing harm to research

subjects, and justice means the fair distribution of benefits and risks among participants

(Belmont Report, 1979). As the researcher, I ensured that participant selection was conducted in

an ethical fashion in compliance with the Belmont protocol. I obtained written consent from the

participants in advance of conducting the interviews and verified that participants received full

disclosure regarding the purpose of my research. I obtained voluntary consent from

participants, which is required of researchers prior to data collection. I advised participants of

their right to withdraw from participating in this study at any time. Participants confirmed their

intent to me in writing prior to the disclosure of my findings. I did not select participants from

vulnerable groups.

As the researcher, I ensured that participants remained protected during interviews to attain bias-free data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I accurately interpreted responses to avoid bias and disclosed preconceptions that could create bias (Davidson et al., 2016). By using multiple data collection instruments that were compliant with methodological triangulation, I reduced researcher bias in this study. I used member checking, defined the data collection process, and used methodological triangulation. Following an interview protocol can mitigate bias (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019). Hence, I created a protocol (see Appendix A) that included interview questions. I used the interview protocol to ensure that participants received and responded to the same questions, and I used a script detailing what I would say before and after the interview.

Participants

The participants in a study should be relevant to the study to ensure the integrity of the responses (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019). In this study, I expected that small online business owners with success beyond 5 years would be able to provide valuable information. Participants met the following requirements to be eligible: (a) had owned a small business on the east coast for more than 5 years, (b) operated their business online, and (c) had implemented online small business strategies successfully. Following IRB approval, I began the recruitment process. I conducted a multiple case study, considering at least five online small businesses with less than five employees. I obtained the participants' contact information from via social media to gain access to the participants. The participants received an invitation to participate in an initial email message. I followed up with an email to explain the research and request their participation. Those who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form in another

email and were asked to indicate their consent to participate by return email. Those who were

not selected or who declined participation received an email thanking them for their time. This

informed consent email assured the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any

time.

A key component of establishing a working relationship is building trust (Rubin & Rubin,

2012); therefore, the participants and I mutually agreed on the Zoom location for the face-to-

face interviews. Stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures had been implemented in

the United States due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2020). All interviews were

conducted virtually to protect the participants and me. To establish effective and cohesive

relationships, I informed all participants of the intentions and expectations for this qualitative

multiple case study before they signed the letter of consent. Participant interviews took place in

an agreed-upon area. I reminded each individual that participation was voluntary and remained

tactful and professional throughout the interview.

Research Method and Design

In this section, I provide the rationale for the selection of the research method and

design. Researchers use the method most appropriate to answer the research question. In this

study, I explored strategies that online business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5

years.

Research Method

The three primary research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed. This

research study explored questions about the strategies that online small business owners use to

sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The qualitative research method is a valid approach for

academic studies (Mertens, 2014). In a qualitative research study, the researcher's goal is to

understand the underlying issues of the question based on input from participants (Aguinis &

Solarino, 2019; Mertens, 2014). A limitation of qualitative research in this case was the inability

to display interpretations of small business sustainability through statistical results (Giorgi,

2017).

In quantitative research, the theory is developed before the data collection process

begins (Mertens, 2014). In such research, the researcher seeks to test a theory and examine

relationships using statistical analysis (Bryman, 2012; Gerring, 2011). Through the use of closed-

ended questions and analysis, the researcher determines whether a relationship exists (Bryman,

2012; Gerring, 2011). A quantitative approach is appropriate when the intent is to analyze

numerical data and explore relationships among the variables. It is not appropriate when there

is a need to perform an in-depth analysis through the use of open-ended questions (Marshall &

Rossman, 2016). Researchers use experimental quantitative design to collect data that have

limited, predetermined responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Descriptive data that could be

collected from participants regarding leadership could not be quantified (Marshall & Rossman,

2016). A quantitative approach was not appropriate because it would have prevented the

gathering of descriptive data on small business owners' experiences.

I also considered the mixed methods approach. The quantitative and mixed methods

approaches were not appropriate because the complexity of integrating the two methods would

have increased the time required for the study, and I did not seek to test a hypothesis (Mertens,

2014). Additionally, I was not trying to examine the relationships among variables to determine

whether a relationship exists or to test a hypothesis. Therefore, I ruled out the mixed methods

approach for this study. The qualitative research method was most appropriate for this study

because it allows in-depth exploration of strategies using participant interviews and numerical

data to explore and comprehend decision making and human behavior (Marshall & Rossman,

2016). I chose the qualitative research method to explore the strategies that online small

business owners use to sustain a business beyond 5 years.

Research Design

A case study is a qualitative approach that researchers use to observe certain activities

within the overall context of the research (Mertens, 2014). There are three factors that fit the

criteria for a case study. Case study researchers seek to address the *what*, *how*, and *why* of an

issue being studied (Mertens, 2014). The researcher must remain independent of the

participants. Further, the focus of the study must be a current issue. All three criteria were met

in this study. In a single case study, the focus is limited to an area of interest or one group

(Mertens, 2014). In a multicase study, there are several interests or focus areas that the

researcher would like to examine (Mertens, 2014). For this study, the focus was online business

strategies to sustain a business beyond 5 years. I explored the strategies that one online

business used to stay in business following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another qualitative design considered for this study was narrative design. Narrative

design is appropriate when exploring a process, which was not the intent of this research study.

Researchers who use the narrative design must interpret the meaning of the information

presented in a narrative, as opposed to a case study, where information is presented based on

interpretations of participants. The narrative design is useful in identifying stories, journals, and

life experiences of individuals. The objective of this study was to explore strategies that online

business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. Participants' perspectives and experiences provided information to assist in defining this research study.

Additionally, combining the findings with other evidence provided valuable information for the study and its conclusions. In a qualitative case study, the researcher focuses on experiences by asking open-ended questions of the participants, who provide feedback with detailed responses. To confirm data saturation, I performed member checking, giving participants the chance to add information and validate their feedback. Member checking allows researchers to identify data saturation if no additional material is included (Reilly, 2013). In this study, I compared participants' interview responses with observational data and archival documents. Researchers can achieve data saturation if no additional information is discovered. Member checking and triangulation of data sources are techniques to be used to increase the reliability and validity of a research study.

I also considered phenomenological and ethnographic designs. In a phenomenological study, the researcher interviews participants within the context of a phenomenon and elicits meaning from their experiences (Mertens, 2014). Phenomenology was not appropriate for this study because I was seeking to uncover new strategies based on the findings. In an ethnographic study, the researcher explores phenomena within a group's culture (Mertens, 2014). The ethnographic design was also unsuitable for this study because I was not exploring the cultural issues of a specific group. The case study design was appropriate for this study because it helped me discover strategies that online small business owners use to increase their chances of sustainability beyond 5 years.

Population and Sampling

In this qualitative case study, I used purposive sampling of participants. Researchers use purposive sampling to identify participants who can address the research question to ensure that the information collected is relevant (Morgan et al., 2016). Participants who had owned a small online business for more than 5 years could help in addressing the central research question. Using a small sample size allows researchers to ask open-ended questions to obtain detailed responses (Gelhorn et al., 2016). I conducted interviews to explore the strategies that small online business owners use to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. Researchers use qualitative multiple case study to achieve data saturation through the use of various cases to understand similarities and differences (Morgan et al., 2016). Participants for this study were small online business owners with less than five employees who had sustained their business beyond 5 years. I continued to sample participants until I reached data saturation, as measured by the redundancy in participant responses.

Researchers should select participants with relevant experience for effective data collection (Fisher et al., 2016). To participate in this study, participants met the criteria of being a small online business owner for at least 5 years. The purpose of this multiple case study was to identify the effective strategies that small online business owners use to sustain operations beyond 5 years. Social distancing measures had been mandated in the United States due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baker et al., 2020). For the safety of participants and me, no face-to-face interviews were conducted in this study. The setting for all participant interviews was Zoom.

Ethical Research

It is the role of the researcher to protect participants from harm and obtain their consent prior to a study (Marrone, 2016). The participants in the study needed to understand their role (Astroth & Chung, 2018). In the document provided to participants in this study, I disclosed the intent of the study and the role of the participants. In a participant consent letter, I provided details on the research process and the steps to ensure that it was ethical. By providing a consent letter, a researcher can uphold privacy and ensure confidentiality (Morgan, 2019). To meet IRB requirements, I obtained written permission from all participants to ensure their readiness to participate. The IRB approval number will be provided in the study. The process of obtaining informed consent is a key component of conducting ethical research prior to collecting data (Cypress, 2017). The consent letter contained background and procedural information, ethical considerations, and disclosure about payment, if applicable.

The role of the researcher is to protect the participants and ensure integrity (Belmont Report, 1979). Participants were made aware of the option to withdraw from the study. In addition, confidentiality is an essential component of ethical research. Coding participant data enhances security for participant information and increases confidentiality (Vitak et al., 2016). The information from this study will remain in a secure location for 5 years. According to Walden University protocols and guidance, I will destroy the data after this period for participant privacy. I also advised participants of their right to withdraw from participating in this study at any time. No incentives were offered for participation in this study.

Data Collection Instruments

The researcher is the primary data collection instrument in a qualitative research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The beginning of the data collection process consisted of semistructured interviews with successful online small business owners. Observing participants' body language while recording and taking notes is an effective data collection practice (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers use interviews to explore and gather in-depth data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I selected participants, drafted open-ended questions, and developed an interview protocol (see Appendix A). I conducted interviews, took detailed notes, recorded and transcribed responses, and performed member checking. Member checking is a technique used for participant validation, in which the interview results are sent to the participant for validation (Reilly, 2013). I used member checking in this study. After data analysis was complete, I emailed the draft of final results of the study to the participants and asked them to review my conclusion to ensure that I did not misunderstand or misrepresent anything.

Researchers conduct semistructured interviews to gain insight into each participant's understanding of potentially addressing the research question **(**Marshall & Rossman, 2016**)**. I selected open-ended questions and ensured that participants receive the same questions. The use of an interview protocol helps the researcher focus on the topic at hand. Each interview consisted of eight open-ended questions to understand the strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years. This use of open-ended questions to the participant allows them to provide detailed responses to the questions asked **(**Marshall & Rossman, 2016**).** I also reviewed the business's archival documents. The use of archival and supporting documents provided additional information that could not be obtained during the

interview. Obtaining archival records from participants in qualitative research provides researchers with secondary data to assist in triangulation (Yin, 2017). I collected archive documents on each company's website and policies.

I transcribed the interviews by using Temi software. In addition, I recorded relevant nonverbal communication via journal entry. Member-checking is a validation method used by the researcher, who gives the participants the opportunity to evaluate the researcher's understanding of their responses **(**Reilly, 2013**).** I collected and stored the participant responses received in the member checking process, in addition to the transcribed interview information.

Data Collection Technique

The semistructured interview process used for this study consists of open-ended questions, participant interviews, and recorded data to explore strategies small online business owners use to sustain business operations beyond 5 years. I used the semistructured interview process to enhance my ability to discover new material by exploring past experiences through the use of open-ended questions. The interview questions consist of eight open-ended questions (Appendix B). I developed interview questions that were in line with the topic of study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews were be conducted virtually via Zoom 5.0. To collect data, I captured the interview responses using the record feature within Zoom. The recorded information was transferred into a word document for review. The advantage of using this technique is the ability to go back and review the interview responses after the interview session is over. The disadvantage is that I was not in the same location as the participant during the interview. As a part of the researcher's requirements, I provided the option of withdrawal to participants up to or any time during the scheduled interview.

I obtained permission to audio record each participant. Audio recording the participant interviews allowed for data to be easily transcribed. I did not conduct a pilot study after IRB approval is granted. Consent is required to record participants, so each participant is aware of and approves the collection method **(**Belmont Report, 1979**)**. I took notes in a journal and compared it to the recorded data to ensure accuracy. I provided the interview protocol to each participant (Appendix A). Taking notes allowed me to record nonverbal responses from the participant.

In addition to recording nonverbal communication, interviews provide an additional opportunity to record nonverbal communication (Wick, 2017**).** Bias and incorrect interpretation can devalue the integrity of the data (Wick, 2017). The semistructured interviews can make it difficult to capture large amounts of information **(**Wick, 2017**).** The use of both semistructured interviews and documentation assisted in achieving methodological triangulation. I collected archival documents from the company's website and any related written material provided by the participants to support their interview responses. I useed the record feature on Zoom 5.0 during the interview, which allowed me to analyze trends and common phrases during the analysis phase. The use of the comparison method in qualitative research can determine data saturation (Cypress, 2017).

The use of interviews can also help the researcher triangulate the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The limitation of this approach is biased because participants can change behavior during the interview (Wick, 2017). I performed member-checking to add to the credibility of this research study. Furthermore, I conducted semistructured interviews with a quality control mechanism to validate my interpretation. I used member-checking to attain

participants' feedback on my interpretation of their responses, by sending the final results of the study to the participants and ask them to review my conclusions to ensure I did not misunderstand or misrepresent anything. Member-checking minimizes an inaccurate understanding of participant responses and allows the researcher to record correct results (Reilly, 2013). Data saturation is achieved when no new information is uncovered during participant interviews (Reilly, 2013). I achieved data saturation in this study because no new information was uncovered as I interviewed new participants. I did not conduct a pilot study after achieving receiving IRB approval.

Data Organization Technique

As the researcher, I develop an organized system of cataloging and labeling when storing and accessing data. I obtained participant permission to use the audio record function within Zoom 5.0 to ensure that they are comfortable. The use of the audio recording in Zoom 5.0 helped identify common themes among participant responses (Wick, 2017). The transcripts from the recorded interviews will remain in a locked safe, as required by Walden University, until their destruction 5 years after study approval. When the interviews were complete, I stored the transcriptions for participant interviews and member checking communication documents in a labeled folder and include any notes taken during the interview. I used Temi to track responses. As the researcher, I used an organized system of cataloging and labeling when storing and accessing data. I created a labeling system (e.g., P1B1, P1B2, P2B2, etc.) to identify each participant. When labeling, P refers to the participant and B refers to each business.

I will delete all files after 5 years to enhance confidentiality. It is essential to maintain data integrity and participant privacy in ethical research (Reilly, 2013). I have exclusive access to the data, and no identifiable information from participants appeared in the publication of this study. Using data comparison, I collected information and achieve data saturation. I used a consistent interview protocol (see Appendix A). The use of an interview protocol ensures that participants go through the same process and increases the validity of the study (Doody & Noonan, 2016). Key topics for the interview are included in the interview protocol. I used the audio recording feature in Zoom, to capture data. The use of a recording device allows the researcher to focus on interviewees by using active listening (Reilly, 2013).

Data Analysis

The four types of triangulation are method, investigator, theory, and data source (Nelson, 2017). In this study, I used methodological triangulation. When researchers use data analysis, they examine, categorize, test, and tabulate the information. The data analysis is carried out in five steps: compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2017).

Compiling

Researchers use compiling to collect and organize data (Yin, 2017). I collected data from interviews and company documentation. I used an organized system of cataloging and labeling when storing and accessing data. I created a labeling system (e.g., P1B1, P1B2, P2B2, etc.) to identify each participant.

Disassembling and Reassembling

Disassembling and reassembling involve placing the data into groups, determining themes, and regrouping the data by theme (Yin, 2017). I analyzed all information to identify themes and align data with evidence. The notation of themes and patterns helped to identify the achievement of data saturation. For this study, I was the primary data collection instrument. I used the collected information to compare common themes and align data to identify whether a correlation exists between small online businesses' effective strategies and their operations beyond 5 years. I compared transcripts and observation notes to minimize and eliminate categories. I used the frequency method to categorize similarities and variances in participants' responses is effective (Yin, 2018). I used NVivo 11 software to organize the data to code and develop themes

Interpreting

Interpreting is defined as associating the themes with existing research and the conceptual framework (Yin, 2017). I examined the information from interviews and company documentation. I then compare them with existing research and my conceptual framework. I referenced my literature review and conceptual framework as I interpret the data.

Concluding

Finally, researchers interpret the information and draw conclusions about it (Yin, 2017). I collected data from interviews and archival documents on the company's website or provided by the participants to support their interview responses. I used NVivo 11 software as the primary tool during the five stages of data analysis. I used my literature review and conceptual framework when drawing conclusions.

When the researcher examined the information, a review of the interview transcript was completed. Sorting the information allows identification of themes and permits the researcher to examine the full interview and make corrections to outputs if needed (Joslin & Müller, 2016). The audio recording of the interview allows the researcher to examine interviewee responses to ensure accuracy (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The researcher should examine the themes that arise and compare them to determine similarities (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Data saturation occurs when information captured from interviews is similar. The next step in the data collection process is to develop codes by organizing and grouping the data for future access (Yin, 2017). This coding process will allow the researcher to draw out themes (Yin, 2017). In addition, the use of coding will allow the researcher to align participant responses to underlying theories and themes (Yin, 2017).

Reliability and Validity

Future scholars can use the conclusions from this study. I have provided quality data in this study. Researchers ensure valid data through the reliability of their research. To enhance quality, researchers must also maintain accurate records and select relevant participants and documents used in the study. Sharing the process for oversight and the development of procedures displays reliability (Birt et al., 2016).

Reliability

The standardization and consistent use of research procedures defines dependability (Reilly, 2013). In this study, I provided a record of the data collection method and research design. Reliability of a study is enhanced when the researcher documents procedures and maintains a log to record those procedures. Researchers use journals as a valid way to

document procedures for future use (Etikan et al., 2016). I explained the steps in this study to ensure that my findings are trustworthy. I also ensured reliability by verifying the accuracy of the data. As the primary researcher for this study, I reviewed interview recordings against the transcript to ensure accuracy. I transcribed interviewee responses using NVivo 11 software. Researchers must limit bias when reviewing data (Harrison et al., 2017). As the researcher, I used member checking to validate my conclusion and allow participants to review the information for accuracy. I sent the final results of the study to the participants and ask them to review my conclusion to ensure I did not misunderstand or misrepresent any of the participant responses following the interview to review (Runfola et al., & Gregori, 2016). Misinterpreting data could produce invalid findings (Runfola et al., 2016).

Validity

Credibility

Procedures and tests are used by qualitative researchers to verify accuracy, creditability, and reliability of the research presented (Emerson, 2016). Credibility is defined as self-assurance and acceptance of the results (Anney, 2014) Achieving credibility enhances the trustworthiness of the research outcomes. Triangulation and member checking increases creditability (David et al., 2016). In this study, I used methodological triangulation to demonstrate credibility across data collection techniques. Researchers use methodological triangulation to validate data through interviews, achieve documents, and observations (Nichols, 2016). The advantage of using methodological triangulation is the ability to use several sources to reinforce a qualitative study (Turner et al., 2017). Researchers also provide detail accounts of the research process, use

open-ended interview questions, and discuss limitations to ensure information can be

transferred for future use. (Vaughn & Turner, 2016).

Transferability

Transferability is defined as the extent to which the findings of the research can be

applied in a different way (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). When future researchers follow the

documented procedures, they should come to similar conclusions. Research that is free of bias

enhances the comfortability of the research. In this study, I wrote down observations as they

occurred to reduce bias. The researcher must also ensure the accuracy of data to avoid bias

(Turner et al., 2017). I reviewed all information for accuracy and used member checking to

validate participant responses.

Confirmability

Confirmability is defined as ability to represent participants' responses, demonstrate the

collected data, and identify a researchers' bias (Hussein, 2015). I provided information received

from participants that is free of bias. Researchers maintain an audit trail during data collection

and analysis processes to demonstrate confirmability and a record of the different approaches

used in the research (Wamba et al., 2015). I enhanced the confirmability by keeping an audit

trail of member checking findings, data gathering, analysis process, and conclusions.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is used to increase reliability through the identification of

commonalities in information (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Data saturation is achieved when

repetition in responses for interviewers occur and is an indication that you have a sufficient

sample size which strengthens the research outcome. I sought to achieve data saturation in this study.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included the purpose statement, role of the researcher, data collection, and validity of this study. Section 2 presented the methodology used in this study and a review of the purpose of this research. I used a qualitative research approach and a multicase study design to explore business strategies that sustain small online businesses beyond 5 years. Researchers can build on a theory using a multicase study design. In this section, I explained the alignment with the central research question and the purpose statement, and I discussed the criteria for collecting data, managing and storing data, and interviewing. Section 2 contained subsections on data collection instruments, data organizing techniques, and data analysis. The data collection process involved a self-developed interview protocol and archival document review. This section also included the requirements for participants, ethical research, and population sampling methods. Section 2 also included the discussion of reliability and validity, ensuring that the doctoral study meets quality standards. Section 3 includes a discussion and presentation of the application to professional practice of the results and findings and implications for social change and I present my recommendations in the areas of sustainability and leadership in small business.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the competitive strategies that online small business owners use to sustain their companies beyond 5 years. I conducted participant interviews with online small business owners who had sustained their business beyond 5 years. This study may positively affect social change by enabling online small business owners to achieve economic growth that benefits their communities. This study's findings included strategies that online small business owners chose to use. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) have social media presence, (b) develop relevant content, and (c) know your target audience.

Presentation of the Findings

One research question guided this study: What competitive planning strategies do online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years? I used NVivo 11 software to analyze the collected data. I discovered three major themes: (a) have a social media presence, (b) develop relevant content, and (c) know your target audience. The three major themes relate to this study's conceptual framework because the themes point to successful strategies to sustain an online retail business beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework for this study was the digital disciplines theory. The goal when applying this framework is to find ways for business leaders to incorporate technology to achieve a competitive advantage through customer service, efficient processes, and innovation (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015).

I transcribed the participants' interview responses. I then used NVivo 11 software to analyze the interview transcripts. NVivo 11 software helped me identify frequencies in words

used in the interview transcripts. I reexamined the context in which those phrases were used as a part of the data analysis process. Table 1 includes a breakdown of the most frequently used words in the interview transcripts. *High-frequency words* are defined as words with occurrences of greater than 15% that were mentioned by at least 60% of the participants.

Table 1

NVivo 11 Word Frequency Results

Word frequenc	P1B1	P1B2	P1B3	P1B4	P1B5	Total	%
Content	5	10	0	0	12	27	24%
Marketing	7	3	3	0	0	13	11%
Group	0	1	0	1	1	3	3%
Community	0	4	0	0	4	8	7%
Social media	7	2	8	1	12	30	26%
Audience	1	12	1	0	3	17	15%
Platform	4	8	0	0	4	16	14%
Total	24	40	12	2	36	114	100%

Theme 1: Have a Social Media Presence

Social media were mentioned most frequently as a factor that affected online business success beyond 5 years. All five (100%) of the study's participants mentioned social media as a contributing factor to success. In reviewing the participants' public business sites, I found that every participant had an active social media business platform. The customer-targeted informational content and advertisements found on the participants' social media platforms

such as Facebook and Instagram and their interview responses indicated that they used social

media as their primary way of connecting with and soliciting responses from potential

customers to expand their customer base. Customer-targeted online content comprises social

media written or video communications directed to a business's target audience to drive a

specific response (Minning, 2019). For example, P1B1 began to create content by posting online

content on her Facebook and Instagram page and examining the comments from her target

audience on how they were handling the pandemic and what support they needed. She

reviewed all the comments and found that her audience needed help with creating video

content. This approach was successful because from there, she developed additional content

and services based on the responses that she received. In Figure 1, P1B1 provides content based

on the feedback from her target audience.

Figure 1
Content From P1B1: Content Based on Audience Feedback

When P1B5 was asked how she sustained her business in economically challenging

times, she noted that she used social media to build on her existing social media presence by

using customer-targeted online content. When P1B3 was asked what resources she used to

develop her strategies, she indicated that she did a lot of research about social media by

following successful business owners; they provided her with resources such as Wordpress to start her website and provided tips such as connecting with other businesses and offering a finder's fee to expand her customer base. She then purchased the software for business use. P1B3 said that she connected with event planners, funeral directors, hairdressers, and barbershop owners to ask them if she could give them a free product to put in their business and pay them a finder's fee for business generated from them.

P1B1 indicated that she connected with her target audience by using Facebook and Instagram to post informational content about new products, market services through videos and written content, and solicit feedback about past content through social media surveys. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people were suddenly forced into digital platforms and had to figure out how to use Zoom for work. P1B1 began to create content to teach her customers how to navigate the online business environment while offering her services through Facebook and Instagram live videos and written content. P1B1 described the importance of knowing how to create recorded content that the target audience can access, having a content marketing system, and being consistent:

> Knowing how to create great content and creating a content marketing system and being consistent. So always [be] out in front of [her] ideal clients [and] giving great value, whether it's via video or social media posts or resources, but it's. . . staying consistent, and . . . being a resource.

A content marketing system involves using social media marketing business websites and social media platforms (Kose & Sert, 2017).

P1B3 noted that Facebook and Instagram were her primary resources for researching sustainability strategies. Her primary social media platform was Facebook. Below is an example of this from P1B1.

P1B1 set up a system that sent individual follow-up marketing emails to people who replied to the content that she posted on Facebook and Instagram to sell them her classes and services. The people who responded to this post received follow-up messages marketing her products and services. She used services such as MailChimp and MailerLite, which provided her simple ways to integrate a built-in email marketing system into her business website so that she could schedule automated marketing messages for her target audience.

All participants noted that consistently interacting with their target audience on social media contributed to their success. According to participant responses, social media interaction constitutes the initial communication of information and responses to information by using a social media platform for written content, videos, educational posts, and direct marketing posts aimed at a business's target audience. The social media theme identified in the findings is related to this study's conceptual framework of digital disciplines theory, which was intended to help virtual and traditional businesses gain a competitive advantage by using technology (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Wiersema and Weinman (2015) provided four strategies that create distinctive customer value: information excellence, solution leadership, collective intimacy, and accelerated innovation. The social media theme also ties into solution leadership.

Solution leadership includes every component of product leadership and adds various ecosystems such as cloud services and social networks that contribute to the online customer service experience (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). P1B1 indicated that social media platforms

allowed her to reach more people at the same time. She described how she went live

simultaneously on four different social media platforms to reach her target audience. P1B4

developed business strategies through Instagram and Facebook groups because she could go

into groups and offer deals for her service. The use of social media platforms for marketing

increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing businesses to find new opportunities to

gain competitive advantages through effective social media marketing strategies (Mason et al.,

2021). The social media theme relates to solution leadership because of the use of online social

media networks. Eighty percent of participants indicated that they used online social media

networks to market to their target audience, post videos and written content, and serve as a

primary source of business. Social media networks were a part of every participant's operating

model and business strategy. Social media presence was identified as a theme that affects

online business success beyond 5 years. The social media theme also relates to this study's

solution leadership conceptual framework because participants indicated that they used online

social media networks for marketing and operations solutions and to be social with their target

audience.

Theme 2: Develop Relevant Content

Development of relevant content was also identified as a theme. The word "content"

was mentioned most frequently by the study participants as a factor that affected online

business success beyond 5 years. Three (60%) of the study's participants mentioned content as a

factor that contributed to their success. Every participant had a social media presence for

posting content associated with their product or service to market their business to their target

audience. P1B1 indicated that content creation, having a content marketing system, and being

consistent are techniques for sustaining business success. A content marketing system involves

using digital marketing and social media, marketing business websites, and social media

platforms (Kose & Sert, 2017). The participants in the study used Facebook and Instagram social

media platforms. A direct link to their store website could be found on their Facebook and

Instagram accounts. They used these social media platforms to market their products and

services digitally. P1B3 said,

> The main strategy [is] posting, which I need to get a little better at, but honestly, every
>
> time I post a picture of my products online I get at least three inquiries . . . and one sale
>
> at least out of those three inquiries.

The cost associated with doing this was very low, as all of the participants used personal

computers and smartphones to record video content and written content on social media.

Below is content from P1B5's store website.

Figure 2
Content From P1B5: Sample Information Sharing

LET'S CHAT ABOUT THE ROMPER TREND

Rompers have been an ever-evolving trend and I have to admit that I am loving everything about it. Each season, I feel as if I see new ways that brands are taking the romper and adding new and varying elements to them to make them look more attractive and act as standalone pieces.

Though it has been a trend that has been around for a while, rompers that look like dresses are beginning to become a huge trend that is overtaking the normal look of the shorts look. As a person who absolutely adores dresses (*dresses are the majority of my closet to be completely transparent*), having rompers that look like dresses gives me the look that I want as well as the functionality to be able to chase around my little guy. With my munchkin, I need to be able to bend down and run at certain points, and with short dresses, I wasn't able to, but with a romper, I can do that.

> ou may have heard me say it before, but I'm going to say it again, I adore rompers. Even though they are a hassle to get in and out of when you have to use the bathroom, they are also some of the cutest pieces that I have in my luxe wardrobe. There are so many prints and styles that rompers come in and one of the styles that I want to focus on specifically are the rompers that are styled so precisely that they actually look like dresses.

In this example, P1B5 provided her opinion on rompers while offering an option to purchase rompers through a sponsor. P1B1 consistently posted videos on Facebook and Instagram that promoted her products and services, which varied in length. She captured these videos by using the record feature on her smartphone to educate and engage potential customers about the service that she offered. P1B1 also indicated that as an influencer and content creator, she was focused on creating content that people wanted to see and that would encourage them to make purchases. She had begun to master fundamental skills, such as writing and taking photos, for making effective content. P1B5 indicated that she polled her audience using Facebook surveys to get to know them so that she could better cater her content to their interests. P1B2 said that she invited people to join her social media platforms by inviting them to listen her podcast via Facebook or Instagram. P1B2 said, "Get in front of as many people as possible, and then, through those means, invite them to subscribe to your list." P1B2 also indicated that a key component of creating effective content is producing the content consistently. P1B2 said, "Consistently showing up for your community, meaning that you are actively serving them" is a strategy that leads to profitability.

The theme of creating quality, relevant content relates to the theme of information excellence in Wiersema and Weinman's (2015) digital disciplines theory, in that it includes components of operational excellence such as the addition of automation, data analytics, and

algorithms that can be used by both digital and brick-and-mortar businesses (Wiersema &

Weinman, 2015). Technology has become a vital resource for successfully operating online

businesses (Schiemann et al., 2017). Like traditional brick-and-mortar businesses, online

businesses require resources for daily operations, and their owners use technology for data

analytics to develop strategies to understand customer behavior, forecast profits, and

determine needed resources (Schiemann et al., 2017). P1B5 explained that the content that she

created for her website and social media sites was meant to engage potential and existing

members of her online social media community, and she used analytics to measure client

interaction on each social media platform based on that content communication. The purpose

of social media analytics is to collect data from social media platforms and use these data to

make decisions for one's organization (Woodill & Media, 2020). For example, Facebook offers

sophisticated analytics that provide business owners insights into each Facebook post, including

the number of Facebook users it has reached and the makeup of that audience (Woodill &

Media, 2020). P1B2 used content creation to measure her clients' experiences. She posted

content, created an automated process to invite customers to subscribe to an email list, and

leveraged that list for sales and measuring customer conversion rates.

The content theme relates to information excellence because of the dispersal of content

via social media networks. Participants indicated that they used social media content to create a

personalized experience for their target audience by posting videos and written content. Social

media content refers to communicating information on a social media platform through text,

videos, and educational posts that appeal to a business's target audience (Anaya et al., 2020).

Customers comment on the information, which allows the owner to start building relationships

by contacting each person who comments via email to offer them their service. Social media networks are a part of each participant's operating model and business strategy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of content via social media and online services increased. Baker et al. (2020) found that the need for online shopping and delivery increased as stay-at-home orders were extended. Businesses' use of social media sites can improve customer awareness and inquiries, enhance relationships with customers, and increase new customer acquisition (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019). Social media also enhance businesses' local and global performances, improving their ability to reach customers on an international level while promoting and improving perceptions of local businesses (Alalwan, 2018; Yong & Hassan, 2019).

Content on social media was identified as a theme affecting online business success beyond 5 years. The social theme ties to collective intimacy, which is related to this study's conceptual framework of digital disciplines theory. The purpose of the digital disciplines theory is to use technology to achieve a competitive advantage for virtual and traditional businesses (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Participants indicated they used online content for marketing and operations solutions and to be social with their target audience, which is a contributing factor to solution leadership.

Theme 3: Know Your Target Audience

Knowing your target audience was also identified as a theme. The word "audience" was mentioned by four (80%) of the study's participants as a contributing factor to their success. In reviewing the interview transcripts to better understand the context of when "audience" was used, I discovered that participants considered the "audience" to be the type of customers they target for a product or service based on demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, age,

profession). Participants also indicated that the customer's financial status was considered as a

customer type. P1B5 said, "I had to realize that my audience [was] also going through financial

strain. . . . So, I kind of made sure to pivot . . . to show things that were in their price point."

Figure 3 is an example of online content from P1B5.

Figure 3

Content From P1B5: Sample Online Content
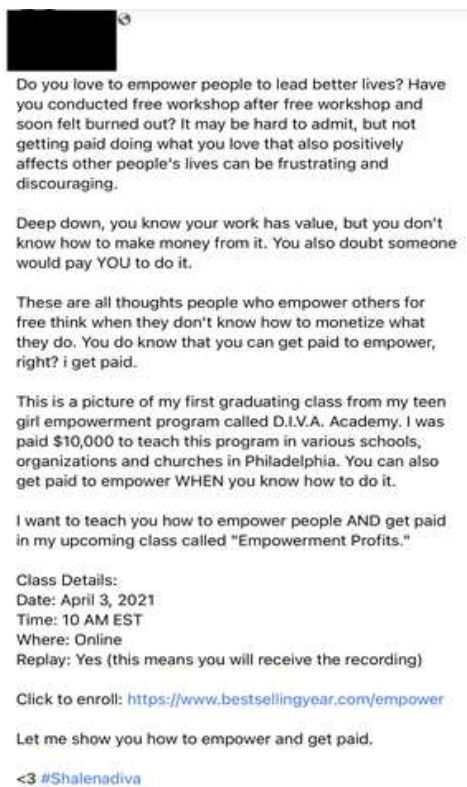
P1B1 indicated that she understands who her audience is and what she can offer them

by consistently surveying customers. PIB4 indicated that knowing the target audience was her

focus when building her business plan. Wiersema and Weinman's (2015) theory consists of four

components: information excellence, solution leadership, collective intimacy, and accelerated

innovation. The target audience theme relates to customer intimacy regarding providing a

variety of unique services for targeted customers (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995; Zacharias et al.,

2016). The goal of implementing customer intimacy is to create a unique brand experience

(Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). The benefit of customer intimacy is increased customer loyalty,

which is based on the owner's ability to effectively manage the customer service experience

throughout the sales process and postsale experience (Chen et al., 2018).

Knowing one's target audience relates to customer intimacy because the business

owner can tailor the products and services to their target audience. Participants indicated that

they used their defined target audience to develop a personalized experience by posting videos

and written content based on the interests of these groups. Participants noted they used

Facebook and Instagram surveys to gather information about the interests of the target

audience. P1B2 revealed that she tailors her content and services based on the survey feedback

from her audience. When asked, "What strategies lead to profitability," P1B5 said, "For me it

was the purpose of making sure that I'm polling my audience, asking them questions, [and]

getting to know them. So then [I can create] the content, the services, and [show] them things

that they're interested in." Figure 4 is an example of content P1B5 developed based on the

feedback she received from her target audience regarding wanting to hear more about

customer attire.

Figure 4

Content From P1B5: Content Based on Customer Feedback

P1B1 also indicated that she polls her target audience by using surveys via Facebook and Instagram to create content and services that her customers find interesting.

The target audience was identified as a theme that affects online business success beyond 5 years. The social theme ties to customer intimacy, which is related to this study's conceptual framework of digital disciplines theory. The purpose of the digital disciplines theory is to use technology to achieve a competitive advantage for virtual and traditional businesses (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Participants indicated that they used their knowledge of their

target audiences to develop a personalized experience by posting videos and written content based on the interests of these groups.

Applications to Professional Practice

The information collected and analyzed for this study provides valuable insight into strategies to sustain an online business beyond 5 years. The findings from this study provided insight into the specific strategies that affect the success of online small business owners. Existing data and research are outdated and few studies incorporated businesses achieving success during the 2020 pandemic. Therefore, the findings of this study could be valuable for future studies as well as for current and prospective online small business owners developing sustainability strategies.

The evidence that emerged during the data analysis process indicated that there are three themes that contribute to online business success. The most frequently identified theme was social media, with all (100%) of the study's participants mentioning it as a contributing factor to success. In this study, all participants had an active social media business platform consistent with this theme. The information found on the participants' social media platforms, as well as responses from the interviews, indicated that participants tend to use social media as a primary vehicle to connect with customers.

The other themes that emerged in this study were content and target audience. The word "content" was mentioned most frequently as a factor that affects online business success beyond 5 years. All the participants have a social media presence they use to post content associated with their product or service and to market their business to their target audience. P1B1 indicated that creating great content and a content marketing system and being consistent

in their business practices are techniques to sustain business success. Knowing your target audience was also identified as a theme. Target audience refers to the type of customers in which business owners direct communication and advertisement increase the sale of their product or service. The customer type is usually based on characteristics such as location, gender, age, and profession. Participants indicated that they understood exactly who their audience is and what they offer their customers, and they built their target audience through means such as podcasting.

The findings from this study could provide valuable insight into strategies to sustain an online business beyond 5 years. The themes of social media, content, and target audience could provide valuable information for future and current online small business owners and future researchers in terms of online small business sustainability. This study incorporates achieving success during the 2020 pandemic. Therefore, the findings could be valuable to future studies and current online small business owners developing sustainability strategies.

Implications for Social Change

The findings of this study could contribute to positive social change. The number of online small businesses continues to increase, and the business environment has become more complex (Turban et al., 2018). Online business owners are challenged by how to manage the success of various products and services (Turban et al., 2018). Therefore, they face unique challenges due to their business structure. Small business owners must adopt innovative strategies to sustain and increase business success (Mazzei et al., 2016). Because online small business owners often lack competitive strategies and their companies are more likely to fail

within 5 years, the results of the study may provide them with effective strategies to sustain

their operations beyond this term.

The implications for positive social change include economic growth for the families and

communities where businesses operate. Small business owners strive to contribute to the

economy, and their gains may also positively affect the employment rate because the success of

businesses in a geographic area strongly influences the economic conditions of its residents

(Dunn & Liang, 2011). Providing online small business owners with the tools for success could

create economic growth opportunities and promote a healthier business environment. During

the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, online shopping allowed for social distancing while

sustaining the local economy by supporting some production jobs, keeping delivery services

operating, and providing needed goods to consumers who were unable to leave their homes.

Recommendations for Action

As the numbers of small businesses continue to increase online, these entrepreneurs'

environments have become more complex (Turban et al., 2018); however, these entrepreneurs

may fail to properly implement fundamental business and marketing strategies needed for

sustainability (Burns & Dewhurst, 2016). In addition, the owners are challenged by how to

manage the success of various products and services (Turban et al., 2018). Online businesses

deliver a less personalized customer service experience; customer service representatives are

not physically present while customers shop, and clients are serviced remotely (Ryu et al., 2019;

Yong & Hassan, 2019). Therefore, current and future online business owners, as well as future

scholars, seeking to focus on sustainability strategies for online small businesses may benefit

from the findings of this study.

Social media, content, and target audience were three themes identified by the study's participants. The first recommendation is to develop a social media account for your business. When P1B5 was asked how she sustained her business in economically challenging times, she noted that she utilized social media in new ways to build on what she already had. She also indicated that doing this allowed her to save funds and invest in other areas, contributing to business sustainability. The finding indicates that it is not enough to have a website for your online business; you should also have an active business account on social media.

The second recommendation is to be consistent in creating content for your target audience. When P1B3 was asked what resources she used to develop her strategies, she responded that she did a lot of social media research that involved following successful business owners and learning from their content. P1B1 indicated that creating great content, implementing a content marketing system, and being consistent are techniques for sustained success. An example of this is consistently posting videos that provide education about the service offered to engage potential customers. The finding indicates that the creation and communication of consistent content could lead to sustainability beyond 5 years.

The final recommendation is to identify the target audience. P1B1 indicated that she is clear on exactly who her audience is and what she offers them. P1B2 mentioned that she started to build her target audience through podcasting. PIB4 indicated that knowing the target audience is related to the conceptual framework for this study—digital disciplines theory. Based on the findings from this study, the steps for useful action are to incorporate a social media, content, and target audience strategy to sustain your business beyond 5 years. The results of this qualitative case study may be disseminated in various ways, including in scholarly business

journals, through presentations at local and national conferences, and at events related to sustainability strategies for online small business owners. This information is also available in an electronic format for public access.

Recommendations for Further Research

The results of this study cannot be generalized for all online small business owners, given that 5 online small business owners provided data. Therefore, additional research should be conducted with a larger sample of online small business owners with the sample including a variety of business types and sizes, with more employees. While qualitative studies provide rich textual data, they cannot give numeric credence to the comments by the participants. Therefore, future researchers should consider a mixed methods study, measuring whether there is a significant difference in the profitability in online stores based on the types and number of social media platforms used and the frequency of their use. To provide even more numeric data, an quantitative experimental design comparing changes in profitability by adding, increasing, or manipulating social media promotions would also be useful to online business owners.

Reflections

When I began the DBA doctoral study process, I wanted to increase the success rate of online small business owners through my education, work experience, and the results of my study. As an African American professional, it was important for me to be able to provide aspiring online small business owners with the tools they need. My desire was to provide strategies to increase the rate of success among online small business owners. My hope is that online small business owners will implement these strategies to sustain their businesses more than 5 years.

In the consent form, I informed participants that this research study is focused on effective strategies online small business owners use to sustain operations. I invited online small business owners who have been in business for more than 5 years to participate. Even though I am not an online small business owner, I believe that the study participants trusted me because the topic of this study was important to them. To mitigate personal bias, I used methodological triangulation and member checking to collect quality data and validate findings (Yin, 2018).

Conclusion

The specific problem that I wanted to explore was that some online small business owners lack business strategies needed to sustain their businesses beyond 5 years. The conceptual framework for this study is the digital disciplines theory, which was developed by Wiersema and Weinman in 2015 (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Wiersema and Weinman's goal was to find ways for business leaders to incorporate technology to achieve a competitive advantage through customer service, efficient processes, and innovation (Wiersema & Weinman, 2015). Based on the data collected from the 5 study participants, all three participants used elements of the digital disciplines theory.

References

Aguinis, H., & Solarino, A. (2019). *Transparency and replicability in qualitative research: The case of interviews with elite informants*. https://doi.org/10.1002/smj.3015

Alalwan, A. (2018). Investigating the impact of social media advertising features on customer purchase intention. *International Journal of Information Management, 42*, 65-77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2018.06.001

Amran, A., Ooi, S. K., Mydin, R. T., & Devi, S. S. (2015). The impact of business strategies on online sustainability disclosures. *Business Strategy and the Environment, 24*(6), 551-564. https://doi.org/10.1002/bse.1837

Anaya, G., Wang, S., & Lehto, X. (2020). A schema-based perspective to understanding hotel social media content strategy. *Journal of Quality Assurance in Hospitality & Tourism*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1528008X.2020.1848746

Anderson, A., Hansen, E., Johannesen, N., & Sheridan, A. (2020). *Pandemic, shutdown and customer spending: Lessons from Scandinavian policy responses to COVID-19*. https://arxiv.org/abs/2005.04630

Anney, N. V. (2014). Ensuring the quality of the findings of qualitative research: Looking at trustworthiness criteria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in Educational Research and Policy Studies*, *5*, 272-281. http://www.jeteraps.scholarlinkresearch.com/

Armstrong, J. S., & Clark, T. (1997). *Review of Barry J. Nalebuff and Adam N. Brandenburger, Co-opetition 1. Revolutionary mindset that redefines competition and Co-operation 2. The game theory strategy that's changing the game of business*. http://repository.upenn.edu/

Arya, A., & Mittendorf, B. (2018). Bricks-and-mortar entry by online retailers in the presence of

consumer sales taxes. *Management Science, 64*(11), 4967-5460.

https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2017.2910

Astroth, K. S., & Chung, S. Y. (2018). Focusing on the fundamentals: Reading quantitative

research with a critical eye. *Nephrology Nursing Journal*, *45*, 283-286.

https://www.annanurse.org

Baker, S., Farrokhnia, R., Meyer, S., & Pagel, M. (2020). *How does household spending respond

to an epidemic? Consumption during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic*. The National Bureau

of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w26949

Balakrishnan, J., Cheng, C., Wong, K., & Woo, K. (2018). Product recommendation algorithms in

the age of omni-channel retailing: An intuitive clustering approach. *Computers &

Industrial Engineering*, *115*, 459-470. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cie.2017.12.005

Bauer, I., Zavolokina, L., Leisibach, F., & Schwabe, G. (2019, January 7–11). *Exploring blockchain

value creation: The case of the car ecosystem* [Paper presentation]. 52nd Hawaii

International Conference on System Sciences, Maui, HI, United States.

https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu

BDC. (2019). *How to price your product: 5 common strategies.* https://www.bdc.ca/en/articles-

tools/marketing-sales-export/marketing/pages/pricing-5-common-strategies.aspx

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). *Entrepreneurship and the U.S. economy*. https://www.bls.gov

Burns, P., & Dewhurst, J. (2016). *Small business and entrepreneurship*.

Macmillan International Higher Education.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-43034-2

Census Bureau. (2020). *Advance monthly sales for retail and food services, April 2020*.

https://www.census.gov/retail/marts/www/marts_current.pdf

Chen, H., Qian, W., & Wen, Q. (2020). *The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on consumption:*

Learning from high frequency transaction data. Social Science Research Network.

https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3568574

Chen, L., Ayanso, A., & Lertwachara, K. (2018). Performance impacts of web-enabled retail

services: An empirical study. *Journal of Computer Information Systems, 58*(4), 301-311.

https://doi.org/10.1080/08874417.2016.1249536

Chen, W., Liu, H., & Xu, D. (2018). Dynamic pricing strategies for perishable product in a

competitive multi-agent retailers market. *Journal of Artificial Societies & Social*

Simulation, 21(2), 212-229. https://doi.org/10.18564/jasss.3710

Chopra, A. (2016). How small businesses can benefit by going online. *Dataquest, 34*(3), 71.

https://www.dqindia.com

Cypress, B. S. (2017). Rigor or reliability and validity in qualitative research: Perspectives,

strategies, reconceptualization, and recommendations. *Dimensions of Critical Care*

Nursing, *36*, 253-263. https://doi.org/1010970000000000000253

David, S. L., Hitchcock, J. H., Ragan, B., Brooks, G., & Starkey, C. (2016). Mixing interviews and

Rasch modeling: Demonstrating a procedure used to develop an instrument that

measures trust. Journal of Mixed Methods Research, 21, 1-20.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689815624586

Del, S. (2018). *Putting data to work: The pursuit of operational excellence of marine assets.*

https://www.marinelog.com

Doody, O., & Noonan, M. (2016). Nursing research ethics, guidance, and application in practice.

British Journal of Nursing, 25, 803-807. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2016.25.14.803

Duarte, F., Kadiyala, S., Masters, S., & Powell, D. (2017). The effect of the 2009 influenza

pandemic on absence from work. 26, Health Economics.

https://doi.org/10.1002/hec.3485

Dunn, P., & Liang, K. (2011). A comparison of entrepreneurship/small business and finance

professors' reaction to selected entrepreneurial and small business financial planning

and management issues. *Journal of Entrepreneurship Education, 14*, 93–104.

https://www.abacademies.org

Emerson, R. W. (2016). Convenience sampling, random sampling, and snowball sampling: How

does sampling affect the validity of research? Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness,

109, 164-168. http://www.afb.org/

Erlingsson, C., & Brysiewicz, P. (2013). Orientation among multiple truths: An introduction to

qualitative research. African Journal of Emergency Medicine, *3*(2), 92-99.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.afjem.2012.04.005

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and

purposive sampling. American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics, *5*(1), 1-4.

https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ajtas.20160501.11

Faith, D. O., & Agwu, E. (2018). A review of the effect of pricing strategies on the purchase of

   consumer goods. *International Journal of Research in Management, Science &*

   Technology, *2*(2). https://www.ijrmst.org

Fisher, D. R., Murphy, A., Jerolmack, C., Hoang, K. K., & Parrenas, R. S. (2016). How to do

   ethnography right. *Contexts*, *15*, 10-19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504216648145

Fusch, & Fusch, & Ness, (2017). How to conduct a mini-ethnographic case study: A guide for

   novice researchers. Qualitative Report. *22*. 923-941. https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/

Gellweiler, C. (2019). Operational excellence as the main customer value: Information

   technology vendors' perspective. *Business Systems Research Journal*, *10*(1), 13-30.

   https://doi.org/10.2478/bsrj-2019-0002

Gerring, J. (2011). How good is good enough? A multidimensional, best-possible standard for

   research design. Political Research Quarterly, 64, 625-636.

   https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912910361221

Gössling, S., Hall, M., & Andersson, A. (2018). The manager's dilemma: A conceptualization of

   online review manipulation strategies. *Current Issues in Tourism, 21*, 484-503.

   https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2015.1127337

Harris, L. & Rae, A. (2010). The online connection: Transforming marketing strategy for small

   businesses. *Journal of Business Strategy, 31*(2), 4-12.

   https://doi.org/10.1108/02756661011025017][]\

Harrison, H., Birks, M., Franklin, R., & Mills, J. (2017). Case study research: Foundations and

   methodological orientations. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative

   Social Research, 18, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs18.1.2655

Headley, M., & Clark, V. (2019). Multilevel mixed methods research designs: Advancing a refined

    definition*.* https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1558689819844417

Hong, S. & Yun, Y. (2017). Fetal exposure to the 1918 influenza pandemic in colonial Korea and

    human capital development. *Seoul Journal of Economics, 30*(4). https://www.ssrn.com

Hussein, A. (2015). The use of triangulation in social sciences research: Can qualitative and

    quantitative methods be combined? Journal of Comparative Social Work, 4(1), 1-12.

    http://journal.uia.no/index.php/JCSW

Joslin, R., & Müller, R. (2016). Identifying interesting project phenomena using philosophical and

    methodological triangulation. *International Journal of Project Management*, 34, 1043-

    1056. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2016.05.005

Kontar, R., Zhou, S., & Horst, J. (2017). Estimation and monitoring of key

    performance indicators of manufacturing systems using the multi-output Gaussian

    process. *International Journal of Production Research, 55*(8), 2304-2319.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00207543.2016.1237791

Kose, U., & Sert, S. (2017). Improving content marketing processes with the approaches by

    artificial intelligence. *Ecoforum.* 1*(10),* http://www.ecoforumjournal.ro/index.php/eco

Ledford, J. L. (2015). *SEO:* Search engine optimization bible (2nd ed.). Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Marcos, P., Belmiro J., & Hans T. (2012) The value net, the delta model, and the aeronautics

    industry*. Revista Ibero-Americana de Estratégia, 11*(2), 5-33. https://doaj.org/

Marrone, S. R. (2016). Informed consent examined within the context of culturally congruent

    care: An inter-professional perspective. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, *27*, 342-348.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659615569537

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2016). *Designing qualitative research* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.

Mason, A., Narcum, J. & Mason, K. (2021) Social media marketing gains importance after Covid-

19, *Cogent business & management*, 8:1,

https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2020.1870797

Mathooko, F., & Ogutu M. (2015). Porter's five competitive forces framework and other factors

that influence the choice of response strategies adopted by public universities in Kenya.

International Journal of Educational. https://emeraldinsight.com

Mazzei, M. J., Flynn, C. B., & Haynie, J. J. (2016). Moving beyond initial success: Promoting

innovation in small businesses through high-performance work practices*. Business*

Horizons, 59, 51-60. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2015.08.004

Mertens, D. M. (2014). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating*

diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Sage Publications, Inc.

Mills, A. J., Durepos, G., & Wiebe, E. (2010). *Encyclopedia of case study research* (Vols. 1-0).

Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397

Minning, L. (2019). Targeted content: the Secret to gaining and keeping customers is just two

words. https://www.activecampaign.com/blog/targeted-content

Morgan, D. L. (2019). Commentary: After triangulation, what next? Journal of Mixed Methods

Research, 13, 6-11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689818780596

Morgan, D. L., Eliot, S., Lowe, R. A., & Gorman, P. (2016). Dynamic interviews as a tool for

qualitative evaluation. American Journal of Evaluation, 37, 109-117.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214015611244

Mukherjee, I. (2018). Applying Porter's five force framework in emerging markets issues and

recommendations. *Strategic Marketing Issues in Emerging Markets*.

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6505-7_28

National Retail Federation, J. (2020, April 15). March retail sales plummet during coronavirus

pandemic. [Press release]. Retrieved from https://nrf.com/media-center/press-

releases/march-retail-sales-plummet-during-coronavirus-pandemic

Nersisyan, Y., & Wray, L. (2020). The economic response to the coronavirus pandemic. 26.

https://ideas.repec.org

Newberry, C. (2020) How to find and target your social media audience.

https://blog.hootsuite.com/target-market/

Nichols, A. S. (2016). Research ethics committees (RECS)/institutional review boards (IRBS) and

the globalization of clinical research: Can ethical oversight of human subjects research

be standardized? Washington University Global Studies Law Review, 15, 351-380.

http://www.openscholarship.wustl.edu

Ody-Brasier, A., & Vermeulen, F. (2014). The price you pay: Price-setting as a response

Petro, G. (2020). Coronavirus and shopping behavior: Men and women react differently.

Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/gregpetro/2020/03/13/coronavirus-and-

shopping-behavior-men-and-women-react-differently/#2d8da2194737

Phadermrod, B., Crowder, R., & Wills, G. (2019) Importance performance analysis based SWOT

analysis. *International Journal of Information Management, 44*, 194–203.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2016.03.009

Pieridou, M., & Kambouri-Danos, M. (2020). Qualitative doctoral research in educational

    settings: Reflecting on meaningful encounters. *International Journal of*

    Evaluation and Research in Education, *9*(1), 21-31.

    https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v9i1.20360

Pietraszewski, D. (2019). The evolution of leadership: Leadership and followership as a solution

    to the problem of creating and executing successful coordination and cooperation

    enterprises. *The Leadership Quarterly.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2019.05.006

Popien, C. (2017). *Digital Marketplaces Unleashed.* Springer.

Porter, M. (1980). *Competitive strategy*. Free Press.

    Quarterly, 59(1), 109–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/00018392145230"

    https://doi.org/10.1177/00018392145230

Rami, A., Antonia, M., Francisco, M., Zaid, O., & Khaldoon, A. (2018). The effect of e-service

    quality on Jordanian students' e-loyalty: An empirical study in online retailing. *Industrial*

    Management & Data Systems. https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-12-2017-0598

Ramirez, A., O'Shaughnessy, T., Sanchez, A., Mattis, S. & Ross, A. (2021). Understanding the

    power of social media during covid-19: forming social norms for drinking among sexual

    minority gender expansive college women. *Journal of homosexuality*, 68:4, 560-576.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2020.1868183

Reilly, R. C. (2013). Found poems, member checking and crises of representation. The

    Qualitative Report, 18(15), 1-18. http://www.nova.edu

Roesler, P. (2019). *Flexibility of shipping options important to online shoppers.* Retrieved from

    https://www.webmarketingpros.com/flexibility-of-shipping-options-important-to-

online-shoppers/" https://www.webmarketingpros.com/flexibility-of-shipping-options-important-to-online-shoppers/

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Runfola, A., Perna, A., Baraldi, E., & Gregori, G. L. (2016). The use of qualitative case studies in top business and management journals: A quantitative analysis of recent patterns. European Management Journal, 35, 116-127. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2016.04.001

Ryu, M. H., Cho, Y., & Lee, D. (2019). Should small-scale online retailers diversify distribution channels into offline channels? Focused on the clothing and fashion industry. Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 47, 74-77. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2018.09.014

Sanfelice, G. (2014). Hit with one shot: Assessing the drivers of target marketing effectiveness. *Knowledge & Process Management*, *21*(2), 143-148. https://doi.org/10.1002/kpm.1441

Schiemann, W., Seibert, J., & Blankenship, M. (2017). Putting human capital analytics to work: Predicting and driving business success: Putting human capital analytics to work. *Human Resource Management, 57*(2), 795-807. https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21843

Simmons, S. A., Wiklund, J., & Levie, J. (2014). Stigma and business failure: Implications for entrepreneurs' career choices. *Small Business Economics, 42*, 485-505. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11187-013-9519-3

Support Systems, *76*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dss.2015.03.010

to norm violations in the market for champagne grapes. *Administrative Science*

Treacy, M., & Wiersema, F. (1995). The discipline of market leaders. Addison-Wesley.

Turban, E., Outland, J., King, D., Lee, J, & Liang, T. (2018). Electronic commerce 2018: A

managerial and social networks perspective. Opportunities for success in e-commerce

and social media and avoiding failure (566). Springer International Publishing.

Turner, S. F., Cardinal, L. B., & Burton, R. M. (2017). Research design for mixed methods: A

triangulation-based framework and roadmap. Organizational Research Methods, 20,

243-267. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428115610808

Turner, S., & Endres, A. (2017). Strategies for enhancing small-business owners' success rates.

International Journal of Applied Management and Technology, 16(1), 34-49.

https://doi.org/10.5590/IJAMT.2017.16.1.03

U.S. Small Business Administration. (2016). *Frequently asked questions*. https://www.sba.gov

Utian, W. H., & Maamari, R. (2014). Attitudes and approaches to vaginal atrophy in

postmenopausal women: A focus group qualitative study. *Journal of the International

Menopause Society*, *17*, 29–36. https://doi.org/10.3109/13697137.2013.850480

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative

content analysis and thematic analysis. Journal of Nursing Education and Practice, 6,

100-108. https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100

Vaughn, P., & Turner, C. (2016). Decoding via coding: Analyzing qualitative text data through

thematic coding and survey methodologies. Journal of Library Administration, 56, 41-51.

https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1105035

Vitak, J., Shilton, K., & Ashktorab, Z. (2016). Beyond the Belmont principles: Ethical challenges,

practices, and beliefs in the online data research community. Proceedings of the 19th

ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing –

CSCW, 16, 939-951. https://doi.org/10.1145/2818048.2820078

Wamba, S. F., Akter, S., Edwards, A., Chopin, G., & Gnanzou, D. (2015). How big data can make

big impact: Findings from a systematic review and a longitudinal case study.

International Journal of Production Economics, 165, 234-246.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpe.2014.12.031

Wati, M. (2020). Online shopping at covid pandemic. Retrieved from: academia.edu

Weinman J. (2018). Strategic applications of big data. *Guide to Big Data Applications.*

Studies in Big Data, *26*, 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53817-4_1

Weinman, J. (2015). *Digital disciplines: Attaining market leadership via the cloud, big data,*

social, mobile and the internet of things. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Wick, D. (2017). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. *Qualitative Research in*

Organizations and Management, 12(2), 169-170. https://doi.org/10.1108/QROM-08-

2016-1408

Woodill, S., & Media S. (2020). Understanding facebook & instagram analytics, The rhyme &

reason behind our design and culture. https://rhymeandreasondesign.com

Yin, R. K. (2017). Case study research: Design and methods (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yong, K., & Hassan, R. (2019). The relationships between social media marketing and

entrepreneurial success: A conceptual study on homestay business in Sabah, Malaysia.

Review of Integrative Business and Economics Research, 8.

https://buscompress.com/journal-home.html

Zacharias, N., Nijssen, E., & Stock, M. (2016). Effective configurations of value creation

and capture capabilities:

Extending Treacy and Wiersema's value disciplines. *Journal of Business

Research, 69*(10), 4121–4131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2016.03.039

Zhan, Y., Tan, K., & Perrons, R. (2018). A proposed framework for accelerated

innovation in data driven environments: Evidence and emerging trends

from China. *Industrial Management & Data Systems, 118*(4).

https://doi.org/10.1108/IMDS-11-2017-0542

Zhou, W., & Duan, W. (2015). An empirical study of how third-party websites influence the

feedback mechanism between online word-of-mouth and retail sales. *Decision*

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

The researcher will label the individual participants P1 through P*N*.

The interview process is as follows:

Introduction

- I will welcome the participant and ask if there are any questions regarding the protocol

  breakdown that they received prior to the interview. ▯

- I will remind them of the overarching research question: What strategies do small online

  business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?

Informed Consent ▯

- I will obtain informed consent in advance of the interview session.

Interview Questions

- I will review the interview questions one by one. ▯

- I will record the responses via Zoom.

Interview Wrap-up ▯

- I will ask if there are any follow-up comments beyond the interview questions posed.

- I will remind the participants that the interviews will remain confidential. ▯

- I will follow up with a transcript to allow participants to review their responses and check

  the data. ▯

- I will give the participants the IRB contact details in the event that they want a

  clarification of the process from the IRB directly. ▯

- I will thank each participant for engaging in the interview process. ▯

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What strategies did you use to stay in business beyond 5 years?

2. As an online entrepreneur, based upon your experiences, what strategies lead to profitability?

3. How have you been able to sustain that success in challenging economic periods?

4. What type of strategic planning did you implement during your first 5 years in business?

5. What resources did you use to develop your business strategies?

6. Based upon your organization's experience, how did your small business plan contribute to your business's success?

7. How do you assess the effectiveness of the business strategies you have used to sustain your business beyond 5 years?

8. *What else can you add to elaborate on competitive planning strategies online small business owners use to sustain their business beyond 5 years?*