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Strategies to Implement Social Media Marketing in Small Businesses

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Abstract

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MSc., Harper Adams University, Newport, England, UK, 2000

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The lack of consumer engagement can have adverse effects on business outcomes. Small

business managers (SBMs) and owners who fail to engage consumers are at a higher risk

of failure. Rooted in the theory of diffusion of innovation theory, the purpose of this

qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore strategies SBMs use to develop

and effectively implement marketing strategies to improve consumers' engagement. The

participants comprised six business managers of six successful small businesses in

Maryland who effectively used social media marketing strategies to engage consumers

for at least 5 years. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and a review of

the companies' documents. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and three themes

emerged: (a) content design and engineering, (b) platforms selection and implementation,

and (c) leadership engagement and tools. A key recommendation is for SBMs to market

content using social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The

implications for positive social change include the potential for business leaders to

promote business success and community growth, leading to better living standards by

providing employment opportunities to people.

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Dedication

I am dedicating this doctoral study to my God, who has given me the grace to successfully go through the innumerous challenges I encountered throughout this study. To my siblings Caroline Nyamboli and Wilfred Nyamboli for their daily prayers, encouragement, and sacrifices made, I will forever be grateful. To my precious and smart children, nieces, and nephews, Evira-Percy, Blessing, Tikum, Ambe, Mfombe, Ikome, and Maureen, I pray that this demonstrates to you that grit and persistence designate success. To my late parents Mr. John and Elizabeth Nyamboli, I dedicate this in memory of your sacrifices, hard work, prayers, education, and the humble upbringing you gave me. This has gone a long way towards my today's accomplishment: I am forever thankful to you both.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses play an essential role in the global economy by generating innovations, new jobs, and economic growth (Karadag, 2015). Despite the important role of small businesses in the economy, about half of them did not survive five years or longer between 2005 to 2017 (Small Business Administration [SBA], 2020). Social media marketing (SMM) strategies are effective means for a small business manager to improve consumers' engagement and convert consumers, grow profitability; therefore, it may lead to improved survival of small businesses (Nawafleh, 2015). Omoyza and Agwu (2016) stated that one of the significant challenges of many small business managers (SBMs) is the failure to adopt SMM strategies effectively. There remains a void in the literature on how to develop and implement effective SMM strategies to enhance small business performance (Cole et al., 2017; Hassan et al., 2015).

Future researchers could explore the effective SMM strategies that small business leaders employ to exploit possible benefits and assess the social media tools and strategies which are most beneficial to remain sustainable (Bouranta et al., 2019; Cole et al., 2017). Marketers employ social media podiums, such as Facebook and Twitter, to enhance consumer engagement by using online comments and posts to engage consumers (Galati et al., 2017). The effective development and implementation of SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement, however, remains a problem for some SBMs due to lack of resources and expertise (Hassan et al., 2015).

Background of the Problem

Small businesses are of great importance to the United States (US) economy. From 2000 to 2017, small businesses accounted for about 66% of net new job creation in the US (SBA, 2020). Small business owners face marketing challenges to effectively communicate to attract and improve consumers' engagement, which may lead to an advantage in a competitive market position (Hutchinson et al., 2015). The adoption of effective SMM strategies to improve communication approaches is one of the most significant marketing challenges for small business leaders (Omoyza & Agwu, 2016). Perčić & Perić (2021) noted that the implementation of an effective marketing strategy is an invaluable asset to the success of a business.

The rapid diffusion of innovation into the global market has changed the communication approaches of business leaders with their customers (Clausen & Fichter, 2019; Kwon, 2021). Social networks offer an innovative and interactive platform for business managers to communicate with customers and triggers the interest of new products (Roberts & Piller, 2016). As consumer engagement remains a primary business success component, small businesses must employ SMM strategies effectively to customer engagement practices and remain sustainable (Herman, 2015; Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). However, Grewal et al., (2019) identified negative consumers' responses when posting on social media backfire due to a lack of effective strategies. I explored how small business leaders develop and implement SMM effectively to improve consumer engagement.

Problem Statement

The failure of organizations to effectively implement SMM may result in difficulties to relate with customers and remain sustainable (Valos, et al., 2017). In a 2017 survey of 300 small businesses that made $100,000 or below across the United States, 75% of the managers indicated a significant challenge to adopting and implementing SMM strategy effectively (Cole et al., 2017). The general business problem is that SBMs lack effective approaches to social media strategies designed to improve customer engagement. The specific business problem is that some SBMs lack the strategies to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. The specific study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. The business impact to the organizations may include the potential for SBMs to have a better understanding of social media and be able to develop and implement SMM strategies to engage consumers effectively and bring about business growth. The implication of positive social change to the community is business growth, which could result in increased employment and tax revenues, leading to an improved living standard for the people in local communities.

Nature of the Study

The principal research methods are qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Saunders et al., 2018). The qualitative research is an inductive approach, suitable for exploratory research in which researchers use to understand the phenomenon via observations, open-ended interview questions, and documentation (Holloway & Galvin, 2016). Quantitative research is a deductive method which researchers use to collect numerical data and perform mathematical calculations and hypotheses testing involving variables' characteristics or relationships (Yin, 2018). A quantitative approach was not appropriate for this study because completing the proposed purpose does not require deductive reasoning about variable characteristics or relationships. Mixed-methods researchers combine both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Kachouie & Sedighadeli, 2015). Although the mixed method may serve to address the qualitative issues of the proposed study, this method was rejected because there are no hypotheses to test and examine underlying characteristics or relationships. The qualitative method is appropriate because I explored strategies that SBMs use to effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement through open-ended interview questions and via documentation provided by the participants.

A multiple case study design was employed to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. Multiple case study researchers depend on multiple distinct cases and data sources such as interviews, observation, documents, and artifacts to facilitate in-depth investigation within a real-world context over a fixed period (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016). Using the

case study enables developing a more intense and more vibrant picture of the research problem than other qualitative research designs (Lewis, & Molyneux, 2018). For example, the phenomenological design was rejected because it limits the exploration to only the meanings of participants' lived experiences (Sylvan, 2018). Researchers use an ethnographic design to study an entire culture (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016); I did not select an ethnographic design because exploring an entire culture of a group of SBMs or owners was not undertaken. A multiple case study design was chosen to produce detailed descriptions of the strategies that SBMs use to effectively implement SMM using concepts to order the data and relating to earlier literature. Yin (2018) emphasized that with multiple cases, researchers can conduct a broader exploration of research questions and concepts, thereby potentially increasing the robustness of the findings.

Research Question

The central research question for the study was:

RQ: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement?

Interview Questions

1. How does your organization use social media as a communication channel to engage customers?

2. What effective SMM strategies have your organization developed and implemented to engage customers?

3. How does your organization develop its SMM strategies?

4. How did your organization implement SMM strategies to engage customers?

5. What, adjustments over time have your organization made to its SMM strategies that have improved consumers' engagement?

6. How, does the management of your organization determine benchmarks of the effectiveness of a specific SMM strategy after its development and implementation?

7. Based on your experiences, what positive effects have the implementation of SMM strategies had on your organization over time?

8. What else would you like to share regarding your experiences in developing and using SMM implementation strategy to engage consumers?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that I used is the theory of diffusion of innovation (DOI), which underpinned and grounded the study, to explore the strategies SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement. In 1962, Rogers first developed the theory of DOI as a communication model and later the foundation of the adoption concept to elucidate how over time, new products or concepts can acquire momentum and diffusion (Rogers, 2015). The DOI theory can be used to explain how, why, and the degree to which technology and ideas spread via cultures to increase the engagement of customers and business growth. The key propositions underlying the DOI theory are innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). In 2003, Rogers described DOI as the process where innovation spreads across communication channels, and as time progresses, the innovation reaches the members of social systems. Muhammad and Chin-Hong (2017)

posited that researchers could use the DOI theory to evaluate individuals' reactions to the employment of innovation and the awaiting success of the implementation. Therefore, innovation and communication practices make the DOI theory an appropriate framework to address the effective development and implementation of SMM strategies by SBMs to improve consumers' engagement.

Operational Definitions

Connected social media (CSM): New social network strategies that attract, engage, and retain consumers by establishing brand trust among social media users via the use of multiple social media (Shrestha et al., 2019)

Customer engagement: A marketing communication strategy that business organizations use to encourage consumers to interact and share their experiences with a firm or brand by leveraging new technologies and tools (Mishra, 2019).

Small Business. The definition of U.S. small business according to the US SBA (2016) is a legal business of a maximum of 500 workers with independent ownership and operates a for-profit business in the USA.

Social commerce: The exchange-related activities that occur during a person's social network in the social media environment which links to the recognition of need, pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase phases of a focal exchange (Yadav et al., 2013).

Social media: A group of Internet-based platforms builds on Web 2.0 ideology and technology, and it allows users to create and exchange consumer-generated content (Stephen & Lamberton, 2016).

Social media marketing: A marketing strategy that includes the use of digital applications, media, and platforms that facilitate interaction, content sharing, and collaboration to promote goods, services, and information (Godey et al., 2016).

Social networking sites (SNS): An online platform such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Instagram that allow users to build a public profile, and use the website to interact with other users with whom they share a connection (Min-Sook et al., 2019).

Traditional marketing: A marketing strategy that uses marketing tools such as radio, television, and print to advertise and promote the products and services (Hassan et al., 2015).

Word-of-mouth (WoM): An unpaid form of promotion in which satisfied customers tell other people how much they like a business, product, or service. WoM is an unpaid form of promotion where customers share information or rumor about a business, product, or service. (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are unverifiable, presumed truths that carry risks and may mislead the results of the findings (Yin, 2018). The disclosure of assumptions in qualitative research is indispensable to the reliability of a research study (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). Therefore, researchers need to unveil all assumptions used or risk invalidated findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2016). I hold three assumptions for this qualitative multiple case study.

(a) SBMs desired to grow business by successfully engaging consumers.

(b) Small businesses use SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement at fairly low costs and high efficiency as compared to traditional marketing strategies.

(c) I also assumed that during the face-to-face interview, all six participants of the study who voluntarily participated precisely recollected past events, and truthfully disclosed personal experiences of using SMM strategies.

Limitations

Limitations are the study's impediments or shortcomings that the researcher has no control of but can affect the transferability of the research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). There were several limitations in this study specific to the data collection process and the research result. One of the anticipated limitations was that some of the responses to the open-ended questions may have created a threat towards an accurate review of experiences in cases where participants found it challenging to recall precise accounts of their experiences. The second limitation was the lack of options to further probe respondents depending on the study's outcome, which may reduce the credibility of the findings. The precision of the data collected from the interview, depending on the experience and judgment of each of the six SBMs, may have limited the use of SMM strategies to a specific industry. Therefore, the results of this study might not be transferable to small businesses in other industries.

Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries set by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study (Saunders et al., 2018). These set boundaries help the researcher focus on a specific area of the study, thereby overcoming limiting factors such as the geographic scope of the study and time constraints. One of the delimitations of this study was the geographic region of the state of Maryland. The second delimitation of the research was the small sample size of six SBMs within six small businesses. Another delimitation was the small population size of the specific qualification criteria for SBMs who have effectively implemented SMM strategies to engage consumers. Lastly, the exclusive focus on exploring SMM strategies used by SBMs to improve consumer engagement was the delimitation as I did not explore other factors encountered by SBMs when improving consumers' engagement.

Significance of the Study

The study's significance is the degree to which the study reflects the potential contribution to the business practice and the implications on social change, which improve SMM strategies' effectiveness for catalyzing business performance and enabling a business to benefit society. The proposed study findings were of significance to organizations. The key beneficiaries and stakeholders from this research's knowledge as the findings may enable SBMs and owners to acquire knowledge concerning business practices such as effective strategies for developing and implementing SMM strategies. Small businesses in the launching or diffusion stage of innovation may use this study's outcome to create and implement effective SMM strategies and practices. Also, the

development of effective SMM strategies may become a guide for new innovators in small businesses entering the market to enhance business sustainability. The survival of small businesses may lead to increased profits and create more employment opportunities, thus promoting positive social change for communities.

Contribution to Business Practice

This study's findings may add to the knowledge of the processes that small businesses can use for the effective development and implementation of SMM. The increased knowledge could also equip SBMs and owners with strategies for implementing SMM and maintaining an increasingly effective online presence. The online presence of small businesses could help in promoting and reaching a larger population size in many more geographical locations and reduce traditional marketing costs (Jiang et al., 2017). Researchers have concluded that information on effective SMM strategies can help the leaders of businesses to (a) increase brand recognition, (b) improve productivity and profitability, (c) improve customer retention, and (d) prevent business failure (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Therefore, the study's findings could help small business leaders develop and implement effective strategies for business growth and sustainability.

Implications for Social Change

The contributions of this study that might lead to positive social change include effective SMM strategies enabling small businesses to increase revenues for increasing employment rate and employee's earnings. Business success and increasing employment could also result in growing tax revenues, which local governments could use to invest in

improving the lifestyles of citizens. Small businesses consist of 99.7% of organizations with paid employees and 40.8% of private-sector payroll (SBA, 2018a). Shibia and Barako (2017) stated that community with increase small businesses, local communities enjoy new job creation, poverty alleviation, and improved living standard. When firms and individuals prosper, families and local communities become healthier because more individuals and families can afford health insurance, enjoy a fairer work atmosphere, local poverty reduction, and higher community standard of living.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

Some managers are not able to develop strategies for the effective implementation of SMM to engage and convert consumers. One of the significant problems in using social media is to develop and implement marketing strategies to leverage social media to get desired results by first targeting the appropriate consumers then engage and convert the consumers (Arora & Sanni, 2019). In this literature review section, the problem statement and research methodology align with the theoretical and academic literature to support the main research question: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement? The responses to the research question and topics such as the diffusion of innovation theory synthesized the marketing innovation literature and provided valuable insight into SMM and customer engagement strategies. The following major components were included in this study: (a) the concept used to form the study, (b) the background of the conceptual framework and justification of choosing Rogers' DOI theory, (c) a review and the significance of the phenomena, (d) gaps and limitations discovered in the study.

The purpose of this review was to present and access the theoretical and academic literature related to the development and implementation of SMM strategies by SBMs to improve consumers' engagement. In the literature review, I used Walden University Library's databases to obtain information such as ProQuest, Business Source Complete EBSCOHost, ERIC, and Science Direct. The key search words and phrases to source quality literature that was used included *the adoption of marketing innovation, consumers' engagement, Roger's DOI theory, innovations, SMM, small business, advertising attitude, marketing communication, and social media platform*. In this literature review, I have reviewed 287 peer-reviewed, seminal, and governmental references. Table 1 shows the taxonomy of references that were used for this study. The total peer-reviewed or seminal publications were 259 references. These peer-reviewed or seminal publications represent 90% of the total references used.

Table 1

Content of References

Reference type	<5 years	>5 years	Total
Peer-reviewed	203	56	259
Not peer-reviewed	21	7	28
Total	224	63	287

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

The diffusion of innovations theory is the postulation that the process of communication of innovation via specific channels occurs over time within members of a social system (Rogers, 2003). Researchers use DOI theory to address business managers' perceptions of SMM, which in return could lend themselves to develop and implement future SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement if found appropriate. DOI

theory is well-known as a theory used to describe the processes suitable for adopters during the process of adoption of new ideas, innovations, or technologies (Shelomi, 2015). Some organizations seem to have used the elements of the DOI theory to understand the strategies that have influenced the adoption of innovation to achieve competitive advantage (Cirus, & Simonova, 2020). The use of Roger's DOI theory in this study could serve to increase the understanding of SBMs on why and how effective implementation of SMM strategy to improve consumers' engagement is vital for business sustainability.

Rogers founded the DOI theory from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and epidemiology, with the principle that new ideas and practices spread via interpersonal communication (Valente & Rogers, 1995). Many other disciplines have accepted this theory, such as in marketing, development studies, health promotion, and communications, have used the approach. Researchers can trace some of the theoretical foundations of the theory back to a study in 1890 of Gabriel Tarde (Kinnunen, 1996). Tarde was the first to relate an innovation's adoption rate with an S-shaped curve about the role of social influence on consumers in rejecting or continuing to use an idea.

In 2003, Rogers described that people accept and adopt innovation in different ways and rates, overtime innovation social system of communication spread by sharing innovation, and the level of understanding of potential adopters of innovations varies. Innovations referred to new practices or ideas, social systems referred to interwoven units to accomplish a common goal, and communication relates to the sharing and receiving of ideas (Blank, 2020). The measurement of time in diffusion to Rogers involved the

innovation-decision process, individual's or unit's innovativeness, and the rate of adoption was a strength in the DOI theory. The understanding of Rogers's innovation adoption process is useful in fostering an innovative culture of innovation. Rogers's DOI theory originated from the study of sociology and agriculture in the 1920s and 1930s (Rogers, 2003). Ryan and Gross (1943) formed the foundation for Rogers's DOI theory by exploring the diffusion paradigm, which showed that interaction, social contacts, and interpersonal communication crucially influenced the adoption of new behavior. Ryan and Gross's concept attracted many more researchers in the 1950s and 1960s to studies the DOI theory in different disciplines applying the theory in different concepts and situations (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

In 1966, Coleman, Katz, and Menzel used the DOI theory to study how doctors' prescriptions and acceptance of antibiotics helped to catalyze network analysis (Burt, 1973). Rogers and Kincaid in 1981 theorized, that communications studies as new ideas in the early 1980s conveyed by mass media or via interaction. Cirus and Simonova (2020) posited that diffusion is the process to penetrate new technology, products, and services via the market and broadcast by social influences. Lupo and Stroman (2020) associated SMM adoption with the characteristics of the DOI theory and found that social media usage is usually beneficial to marketers to foster customers' adoption of innovation. Researchers like Moore and Simon (1999) evaluated the diffusion of technologies using adopted patterns' S-curves over time and revealed the rapid adoption over the last half of the 20th century in different indicators of social conditions such as

environmental health, and social services. The rates of adoption of this data can serve as future innovations forecast, which posited a continuous increase in its diffusion.

I considered using the disruptive innovation theory as the conceptual framework. Disruptive innovation theory is one of the most researched theories in business and innovation strategy literature (Christensen et al., 2018). Clayton M. Christensen, in 1995, first defined the term and analyzed the phenomenon of disruptive innovation (Christensen, 2013). The major difference between the DOI and disruptive innovation theory is that the former elucidates the process of the spread of innovation for a population's adoption and social acceptance of new technology. While disruptive innovation implies that innovation is often based on new market development and value network, and eventually disrupts and displaces an existing market and value network. I could use the lens of the disruptive theory to explore innovation adoption strategies: The theory of disruptive innovation would not, however, help to appropriately explain the innovation adoption process.

The theory of DOI has the characteristics to foster social media adoption and have the information that could assist marketers in understanding strategies that motivate social media usage (Lupo & Stroman, 2020). Innovators use communication channels such as social media, websites, and internet applications for marketing (Andrews, et al., 2016). The use of technology innovation, such as social media for marketing, increased customer reach and adoption, and the competitive advantage of a firm (Nawafleh, 2015). The theory of DOI is vital in SMM strategies as it impacts user's adoption, resulting in businesses leveraging social systems with innovation to influence engagement rates.

Role of Innovation

The definition and the role of innovation have always been complicated, especially in the last decade, characterized by rapid social, political, and technological life changes. The increase of customers to accept new technologies has led to a constant change in the business models of firms (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016). Cooper et al. (2016) referred to innovation as a change in different variations and an outcome. Innovation is the inspirational force behind creativity and new ideas, which may lead to new processes, products, services, or processes (Youngs, & Graf, 2017). Innovation differentiates entrepreneurs from basic small business owners (Cooper, et al., 2016). Small businesses usually have an advantage over large firms as these may often be more flexible to change, which may lead to a quicker generation of innovative products and services (Sahut & Peris-Ortiz, 2013). Effective implementation of innovation enables firms to directly address the needs of customers with greater efficiency.

Innovation is a vital tool for increasing performance (Semuel et al., 2017). Innovation stimulated business growth, sustains economic growth, and gives new potential, such as increased profits (Galindo-Martin & Méndez-Picazo, 2014). Innovation fosters the demand for products or services or inveigled the preconception for next-generation products (Taalbi, 2017). In 2015, Grundström and Uddenberg showed that there is enough evidence which confirms the relation between growth ambitions and the actual growth of a firm. A beneficial relationship prevails between innovation, cash flow, liquidity, and exportation of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) irrespective of the international location of the SME (Battaglia et al., 2018; Love & Roper, 2015).

Innovations like SMM might be the key for small businesses to grow and survive beyond their first five years.

Small businesses can promote consumer-brand engagement by using digital marketing and SMM effectively (Cole et al., 2017). Digital and SMM strategies can foster the visibility, viability, and sustainability of small businesses (Sriram, 2016). Businesses easily reach audiences internationally with less effort, time, and money by using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Basri, 2016). Moreno-Munoz et al. (2016) showed that people spend an average of 17% of their time on Facebook's mobile app. Small businesses can use social media to improve value, but the package of these benefits includes some challenges (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014).

One of the most common challenges in the innovation literature of small businesses is resource scarcity. Woschke et al. (2017) noted that resources for SMEs are often limited, which can restrict their innovation abilities. The lack of ambitions, perspectives, and skills of small businesses may also limit the outcome of the organizations (Borch & Madsen, 2007; Singh et al., 2010). Recently, Collins and Reutzel (2017) and Expósito and Sanchis-Llopis (2018) included that the innovation strategies of managers can also affect the outcome of the business. There is still some fear in empirical research on how growth ambitions and management concepts of small business leaders on how market opportunities and threats might affect SMEs' innovation orientation (Colclough et al., 2019). The study's strategy and knowledge may be useful to SBMs in exploring growth ambitions as they use SMM strategies to overcome the threats that may affect innovation.

Social Media Marketing

The analysis of SMM and innovation in small businesses pinpoint innovation management, customer engagement, collaboration, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and value-added strategies efficiency in small businesses. The evolution of multi-channel to Omni-channels for communication and sale initiatives has promoted firms to constantly search for the most appropriate channels for reaching and intercepting customers effectively (Verhoef et al., 2015). In this sense, social media platforms are a favorite channel for feedback, exchanging opinions, judgments, brand information, and performance. Roberts and Piller (2016) specified that social media has become a more integral part of the lives of people. Increasingly, firms are changing the use of social media to a business tool to enhance performance. At the same time, customers are now accepting products and brands communication via social media channels.

Social media networks provide an interactive and innovative meaning of business communication with customers, which triggers the interest of new products (Roberts & Piller, 2016). There are more than 1.8 million social media users in the world, and 77% of the participants are active either by link click, comments, and/or share (Kanuri et al., 2018). According to Kanuri et al. (2018), business organizations could use social media as a commercial dais for communication with consumers. Li et al. (2021) designated that it is vital for firms to effectively implement SMM to foster their ability to effectively communicate with customers in this era of sophisticated innovations and globalized markets. Employing effective strategies to implement SMM to improve consumers' engagement remains a problem for business managers. According to Omoyza and Agwu

(2016), 62% of marketers stated that one of the most challenging problems of business

managers is to effectively adopt and implement SMM strategies.

In the global market, SMM remains one of the core innovation management

strategies to gain a better understanding of consumers' purchase intentions as they share

feedback and experiences online. Globalization of goods and services is vital in

innovation management as it is a driving force for SBMs to become more innovative to

engage consumers, remain competitive, and improve their market positioning (Story et

al., 2015). Hassan et al. (2015) stated that social media and the Internet are crucial for

small business competitiveness and innovation. The use of social media for marketing

purposes is increasing, making it easier for small businesses to reach audiences outside of

the immediate location (Sajid, 2016). According to Taalbi (2019), innovation is a driving

force for the demand for a product or service or it promotes the expectation for next-

generation products. Love and Roper (2015) discovered the existence of positive

relationships between innovation, exportation, cash flow, and liquidity. However, there is

a potential for cutbacks from social media platforms to firms for SMM that may have a

negative impact on small businesses.

Many social media platforms have begun to cut back on brands' organic visibility

and corporations while prioritizing individual users' content. Platforms like Facebook

have cut on the use of user content as a way to feed news better for the average user; the

issue is that this change will affect brands in the future as they may have to pay more to

continue to achieve the same level of social reach (Hofacker & Belanche, 2016). The

future of SMM on firms was a drastic cut on organic visibility, which may lead to paid

advertising as the only way to achieve meaningful reach. Therefore, SBMs need to develop and implement cost-effective SMM strategies, which may lead to improved consumers' reach.

Another vital factor that makes it necessary for small businesses to look for an effective SMM strategy to improve consumers' engagement is the use of big data analytics (BDA) on social media (social media analytics). Papadopoulos et al. (2016) stated that analytic tools can reduce marketing costs as it was costly to analyze traditional market reporting, which is not today because of the help of BDA. BDA also gives room for business organizations to tap into the exact details that form the marketing strategy of their competitors (Papadopoulos et al., 2016). Despite all the benefits, big data is still a dilemma for managers as it is difficult for marketers or managers to scrutinize the problems alone properly, no matter their expertise. BDA in the wrong hands may also lead to the mismanagement of personal information, individual profiling, discrimination, and breaching privacy (Gharajeh, 2018). However, for small businesses to avoid these issues, there is a need for managers to effectively adopt innovative marketing strategies and obtain information directly from consumers. Applying the DOI theory might serve SBMs and markets to understand how innovations are adopted and the benefits of new technologies to create effective SMM strategies.

Adoption of Marketing Innovations

The adoption of marketing innovations is vital as it contributes to the development and implementation of new marketing ideas and practices such as SMM, which firms use to improve consumer engagement and competitive position. Marketing

innovation helps in the definition and reinforcement of brand-consumer relationships, competitive advantages, and business performance (Cruz-Ros et al., 2017). Contemporarily, marketing innovations are vital elements for the achievement of high business performance and a situation that leads to consumers' satisfaction and loyalty (Perčić et al., 2019). In 2016, Junge et al. stated that marketing innovation included the implementation of new marketing ideas and practices in the product. Perčić et al. (2019) described marketing innovation as the development, diffusion, and adoption of new communication channels with the market or promotion and new customer relationship management approaches.

The adoption of new information technology communication skills by business managers promoted sustainability and growth. Rogers (2003) noted that a useful concept for understanding DOI is adoption decisions. Rogers (2015) categorized adopters into five groups based on the length of time taken to adopt a possible innovation by using the bell curve. These adopters are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Rogers based the degree of adoption on the objective advantages of an innovator and an adopter. Nevertheless, Rogers believed that potential adopters perceive adoption as the key to the fulfillment of the following primary five attributes: relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, and visibility (Perčić, et al., 2019).

A relative advantage to Rogers (2003) is the degree to which adopters perceive that new innovation is superior to the previous innovation. Compatibility is the degree of consistency of a perceived innovation concerning the existing value, needs of potential, and past experiences (Sujatha & Sekkizhar, 2019). Complexity is the rate of else of

understanding and of use of which others perceived an innovation. To Rogers (2015), trialability is the level of limitations to experiment an innovation before deciding to adopt fully. Visibility is how visible the result of the innovation is to other potential adopters (Rogers, 2015). Therefore, the higher the relative advantage is, the more likely is the adoption, the greater the compatibility is with current values and practices, the less the complexity, and the easier it is to experiment without full commitment, the more it is visible.

Rogers (2003) described innovation as a practice, idea, or new object as perceived by an individual or other adopters. Innovation helps in the creation and diffusion of new knowledge, which improves the ability of the economy to develop new products or services and more productive operation approaches. These improvements depend on technological knowledge and other forms of knowledge used to develop products, services, marketing, process, and organizational innovations (OECD, 2015). Prajogo (2016) affirmed that innovation is a principal element for achieving success, the foundation for improving economic competitiveness, and a coping mechanism for changing the business environment. Raynard (2017) stated that marketing innovation is a requirement for the ever-changing enterprise environment in new economic conditions.

Rogers (2003) recognized that innovation is a social process, which reflects a social change caused by both the process of invention and diffusion. In 1996, Kinnunen, started that one of the founding fathers of innovation diffusion, Tarde, said that it is the process of imitation that diffuses inventions. To contemporary researchers, imitation in diffusion terms could relate to the adoption of an innovation (Blank, 2020). In 2017,

Raynard attributed innovation as a successful marketing application of the invention, which means that not all inventions are successful innovations. Zanello et al. (2016) stipulated innovation must not be new to the market or the world, but it could be simply new to the company and have influenced productivity and employment.

Marketing innovations generally may entail the execution of new marketing practices such as changes in the design and packages of products, placement, and promotion, and pricing goods and services. Bakri (2017) related innovative marketing practices to the creation of a new market or promotion communication ways, new price formulation approaches, and the adoption of new communication means. Bakri (2017) also revealed that the creation of new marketing channels, new marketing research approaches, and new customer relationship management approaches are innovative marketing practices. Marketing innovation contributes to fortifying and defining goal setting, competitive advantages, and business performance (Cruz-Ros et al., 2017). The adoption of SMM is one of the innovative marketing practices that is vital for small businesses.

Adoption of Social Media Marketing

The reason for the marketing innovation trend gaining popularity is the adoption of social media podiums for effective marketing strategies. SMM is a vital marketing strategy for businesses to increase products, services, and brand visibility (Sajid, 2016). Nistor (2019) stated that SMM is a cost-effective approach to engage new customers and exceptionally beneficial for small businesses. As competition becomes increasingly intense, interaction with consumers via social media platforms has become essential for

businesses to market, promote, and remain sustainable (Lau, 2015). Consumers engage

with brands by using their brand innovative marketing through social media platforms

such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Roch & Mosconi, 2016).

Innovation in marketing is the adoptive performance of new products or services,

and its managers can measure its success with the use of perceived cost and benefits

(Greenhalgh et al., 2004). In the postulations of the DOI theory, the perceived first step to

diffusion is the acceptance of innovation and the adoption of the technology for use

(Cirus, & Simonova, 2020). DOI theory the ways to which an innovation can diffuse due

to communication and the interactions of consumers in a social network. In 1986, Rogers

considered innovation diffusion in DOI theory as a social phenomenon with four phases:

(i) the adoption demand of the innovation; (ii) communication via specific channels; (iii)

social network communication among individuals; and (iv) communication over time

(Rogers, 2003).

DOI was among the most regularly used theories to elucidate the innovative

adoption of a social system and the acceptance of new technologies by the population

(Rogers, 2003). Some businesses in manufacturing and marketing have used innovation

and uniqueness to gain a competitive advantage (Brem et al., 2016). In Lupo and Stroman

(2020) the adoption of social media is related to the features of DOI theory and found out

that social media usage is beneficial to marketers to foster customer's adoption of

innovation. The application of the theory of DOI theory could also be valuable to

business managers in the process of developing then implementing strategies and new

ideas for consumer adoption. In 1969, through revolutionary paradigm Bass forecasted

adoption based on the number of preceding adopters. The main idea behind the Bass

approach is that media, in the case of this study, social media, starts the diffusion of

innovation, and word-of-mouth (WOM) drives it forward in a cost-effective way. The use

of SMM strategies is advantageous for small businesses in attaining brand loyalty,

engaging consumers, and cost-effectively increasing sales.

     A vital strategy to convey loyalty is to adopt and manage a brand image via social

media by using the tools effectively and on time (Öztürk & Batum, 2019). Innovators and

early adopters influence time as they can try innovations before fully adopting the

innovation, while late adopters turn to experiment with innovation only after discovering

the experiences of early adopters (Rogers, 2003; Smith et al., 2018). Early adopters have

the predisposed the time it took late adopters to fully accept and adopt innovations (Kwon

et al., 2021). Therefore, the earlier the adoption of SMM strategies by SBMs to improve

consumer engagement, the better the ability to forecast consumers' preferences via

interacting with consumers. According to Öztürk and Batum (2019), early adopters can

directly envisage mass-market customers' preferences through their buying motives. The

timely adoption of marketing innovations is a vital factor for small businesses as it helps

in the achievement of high performance, competitive advantage, engagement of

consumers, the satisfaction of the requirements of individual customers, and enforcement

of consumers' loyalty (Niazi, 2017). Within this study, the contribution of small

businesses to the U.S. economy and the perceived convolution was examined.

Contribution of Small Businesses to the U.S. Economy

Many small businesses are individually owned and operated firms that are not dominant in their field and are according to the number of employees (SBA, 2016). In the United States, these are firms with fewer than 500 employees. These businesses are essential to the U.S. economy as they significantly impact innovation, the creation of new and economic growth. These firms are a vital component of socio-economic development globally (Karadag, 2015). In 2015, these businesses in the U.S. have employed 58.9 million people, created 1.9 million net jobs, and represented 47.5% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018a). In that same year, Maryland small businesses employed 1.1 million people, representing 50.2% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018b). In the same firms with the largest share of employment were those with fewer than 100 employees (SBA, 2018a). In 2016, these firms of fewer than 100 employees accounted for 98.2% of the businesses (SBA, 2018a). Based on this record, the small business market is nothing but small, yet, a significant contributor to the U.S economy.

From 1995, small businesses created over 65% of net new jobs in the U.S. (SBA, 2016). From 1998 to 2014, the share of small businesses of the economy fell from 48.0% to 43.5%, as large companies experienced a faster nominal growth of 4.8% versus 3.3% for small businesses (Kobe & Schwinn, 2018). Though small businesses remain a robust engine of the U.S. economy, the fact is these businesses are losing their share of the economy to larger firms due to poor advertising or inadequate marketing (Cole et al., 2017; Kobe & Schwinn, 2018). According to Dobrinić, (2020), the principal components that influence promotion decisions in marketing are financial resources, available

advertising media, and the target audience. Advertising and the use of SMM may play a vital role in assisting small businesses to be more stable, competitive, and lasting (Mahony et al., 2018). In this study, the determinants of advertising and marketing communication were explored to probe SBMs to implement effective strategies that will improve their share in the economy. An explanation for the advertising attitude and marketing communication landscape with its elements of change was discussed in the following section.

Advertising Attitude

The understanding of advertising attitude is vital for a small business manager in the effective development and implementation of SMM strategies. Advertising is a non-personal presentation of information and persuasion about new ideas, products, or services usually paid for by identified sponsors via various media (Kotler & Armstrong, 2017). Advertising is prominent in the U.S.; many firms embraced it as a means of developing awareness, customer loyalty, brand equity, and sales (Cole et al., 2017). Though large businesses view advertising as an investment and means to reach customers, small businesses often do not see advertising as a revenue generator but as an expense (Douglas & Earl, 1982). Small business owners tend to be skeptical of advertising, primarily because results cannot be easily measured.

Small businesses also find it challenging to select the most appropriate advertising media while using the available, most cost-effective method. Small businesses confront cost pressure and competition and generally have limited financial and professional resources (Cole et al., 2017). The primary components that influence promotion

decisions are financial resources, available advertising media, and the target audience (Shoenberger et al., 2020). The attitudes of the audience toward advertising have been a multidimensional and controversial topic in research (Shoenberger et al., 2020). In 1982, Wills and Ryans found that there were polarized attitudes toward advertising. Calfee and Ringold (1988) showed a reasonable level of skepticism of advertising claims by customers as two-third of the population found it not trustworthy. Calfee and Ringold (1994) concluded in their later study that there is a high level of skepticism of advertising as most consumers often believe that it is a persuasive attempt to make consumers purchase what they do not need or want.

Some consumer groups and public policymakers rather believed that advertising skepticism is beneficial and necessary because it creates consumers' awareness of deceptive and unscrupulous advertisers' tactics (Dobrinić, 2020); these consumers believe that advertising is beneficial as it provides valuable information, which outweighs the disadvantages. Nevertheless, there has been a significant shift in advertising and marketing communication in recent years. Eid and El-Gohary's (2013) research on internet marketing, email marketing, and mobile marketing, found that small businesses most commonly use the internet, which included social media and email marketing. They concluded that the use of internet tools for marking had a positive impact on the success of small businesses. Lamberton and Stephen (2016) found a significant shift in marketing communication as digital and SMM have achieved a superior prominence.

Changing Landscape of Marketing Communication

Marketing communication is changing its landscape as interactive media such as SMM, which is gradually overtaking traditional media such as TV and radio. Social media and online advertising Apps are the latest method of marketing communications and the most effective and efficient tools for use by small business entrepreneurs (Mahony et al., 2018). The increasing use of social media tools and platforms influenced the rise of SMM after mass and direct marketing as the third era in the revolution of marketing (Perčić & Perić, 2021). In 2015, for the first time, spending on digital and SMM became more than traditional advertising expenditures on television (EMarketer, 2016). In 2021, the ad of Facebook's reach grew by 8% globally and up to 23% in the U.S while the cost of advertisements on social media platforms also saw a grew of more than 30% due to high competition for ad space. Social media have rapidly changed consumer's patterns of sharing information, and brand interaction, the same way that rapid growth of mobile phone mobilization, as it has opened new marketing communications and targeting opportunities (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016).

Small businesses and social network sites like Facebook are shifting from basically having social media presence to actively using video and social media ads content to engage with their consumers (Bouranta et al., 2019). In a survey of the top active tech companies in the market in the first week of April 2021, conducted by SurveyMonkey, the use of videos and social media ads have increased drastically in SMM as marketers considered it the most important marketing tool in the sector (Financial News Media, 2021).

However, some small businesses find it challenging to select the most appropriate advertising while using the available, most cost-effective, and time-efficient method (Blank, 2020). These businesses also confront cost pressure and competition and generally have limited financial and professional resources (Jackson & Parasuraman, 1986). Despite having limited resources, to stay competitive, small businesses must find a way to stand out, reach, and engage consumers in the marketplace. One of the prominent options to achieve these goals is the use of SMM due to its low cost and the ability for consumers to share information and interact.

Social Media as a Part of Direct Marketing

Direct marketing is an interactive system that has one or more promotional media aimed at providing an assessable response and/or transaction in any way (Kotler, 2017). Direct marketing uses various media to achieve its purpose, which includes direct mail, newspapers, telephone, catalogs, magazines, television, social media, mobile phone, each of which comes with its disadvantages and advantages (Kihyun & Kumar, 2018). Direct marketing is one of the most energetic marketing areas and part of integrated marketing communication tools that create and sustain good relationships with consumers to attract, satisfy, engage, and retain them (Perčić & Perić, 2021). Nevertheless, when firms do not effectively target direct marketing activities, they can have an adverse high cost turning from profitable promotion activity to a loss (Kihyun & Kumar, 2018). Thus, targeting the effective implementation of SMM as one direct marketing activity is vital.

SMM is one of the interactive direct marketing that enhances the advertisers and consumers with the ability of individualization and interaction, which represents micro

marketing. The use of social media advertising relies on the creation of several networks and integrated relations between the social media platform and the advertising company (Wirtz et al., 2017). A major aspect of using the approach of SMM strategy is the appeal of consumers for marketers to create via social media advertisements. Firms should use advertising as a communication means of creating awareness, customer loyalty, brand equity, and sales (Cole et al., 2017). For firms to develop a good consumers-brands relationship, they must prioritize brands, relationships, and quality (BRQ; Lou & Koh, 2017).

Consumer-Brand Relationship

Consumer-brand relationship in marketing has moved from a product orientation to customer orientation and caring orientation. The increasing use of social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google+, has led to firms creating their social media presence and pursuing the engagement of potential customers to establish a friendly customer-brand relationship (Kujur & Singh, 2020). Consumers use the internet to find their desired product or service. Therefore, to attract consumers, advertisers need to optimize their websites using Search Engine Optimization (SEO) centered on keywords. Businesses can increase the number of visits to their website by using SEO to position their sites on search engines freely. For example, the use of promotion on Google and Google AdWords are paid ads that customers can reach by typing the appropriate words chosen by the company.

Businesses use social media to promote these websites through their free online platforms and tools such as social networks, photo sharing, blogs, online videos to

promote these web site, social media. For a marketer, Instagram and Facebook are effective promotional tools that advertisers can use to create a product or service promotion page, and the use of paid ads sets the standard for successful advertising (Zahy, 2017). To be successful, small businesses should precisely target consumers to attract members from their target group (Khamitov et al., 2019). This targeted marketing can lead to people voluntarily following the firm via social networks, which may eventually start direct communication with the firm.

Communication with customers helps in providing the firm with essential information, negotiating on product or service style, taking orders, and delivering. Therefore, SMM brings about a robust consumer-brand relationship. Nevertheless, Moncey and Baskaran (2020) revealed the increasing negative effect on firm reputation due to negative consumer voice on social media. Chen and Lien (2017) indicated that companies can improve marketing effectiveness via stronger consumer-brand relationships and if consumers perceived a brand to have high quality. Therefore, the business initiatives of social media networking, such as brand fan pages, can affect virtual community attitudes and enhance the quality of a brand relationship and circulate positive WOM (Akrout & Nagy, 2018).

The Glitz of Social Media Marketing

The glitz of SMM to small business researchers relates to the effectiveness of SMM in small business growth (Musa et al., 2016). The study of Razak and Latip (2016) on the use of social media by Malaysian revealed that ease of use, perceived usefulness, and satisfaction motivated firms to use SMM. Kumar, et al. (2016) showed increased use

of social media by companies due to their reach. Icha and Edwin (2015) compared the effectiveness of SMM and likened it to that of traditional marketing. There are many benefits for small businesses in using SMM.

Koumpouros, et al. (2015) in Greece disclosed that physicians and healthcare firms must use such SMM to meet the needs of their patients. However, the authors realized a need to research the way to measure efforts like marketing efforts. Sriram's study (2016) showed that libraries could effectively use SMM for their services. Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) discovered that there is an obstinate gulf between SMM activities and practices innovated by marketing theory. Mahony et al. (2018) indicated the importance of how small businesses develop and use social media strategies to take full advantage of the tools. Gould and Nazarian (2018), revealed a great return on investment on social media and its worth to medical practice.

A lot of existing social media research focused either on R&D or marketing (Roch & Mosconi, 2016; Siamagka et al., 2015; Voigt & Ernst, 2010). Nevertheless, little research has been done specifically on the interface between SMM and business-consumer or consumer-to-business relationship settings. Specifically, several researchers demonstrated the need for a structural explanation for the adoption of social media engagement strategy (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016; Guesalaga, 2016; Lau, 2015) for improved marketing and consumer engagement. The next sections assessed determinants concerning the effective use of SMM tools to improve consumer engagement.

Consumer Engagement Strategy

Small business managers need to understand how to use SMM strategy effectively to improve consumer engagement. Customer engagement is an emerging concept in the literature of information systems, marketing, and small business management, which has recently been scrutinized by many researchers (Dessart et al., 2015; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Muñoz-Expósito et al., 2017; Shrestha et al., 2019). Hollebeek et al. (2014) stated that consumer engagement is the psychological state of consumers because of their interactive experience with a firm, brand, and other consumers. Therefore, customer engagement strategies involve giving consumers an unforgettable experience with a psychological feeling of being an essential part of the firm (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016). The use of social media platforms is an effective way to improve consumer engagement.

In this era of a globalized market, managers are under pressure to innovate to add value to products and improve consumers' services to satisfy consumers' needs and to effectively reach and engage consumers (Haleem et al., 2018). Managers can, therefore, use SMM strategy to improve product image and services as well as use social media to improve consumer engagement (Constantinides, 2014). Social media engages consumers by giving them that voice via platforms where their opinions can be heard via clicks of like or dislike, making comments, and even share electronic word-of-mouth. Giving customers a feeling of the importance of belonging, engagement strategies make customers feel they have an important voice in the company (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016). According to Dessart et al. (2015), an effective customer engagement strategy enhances brand loyalty and is critical for the survival of small businesses.

Small businesses can foster consumer loyalty and engagement by using SMM strategies with attractive social media platforms for shopping and by giving customers a memorable shopping experience. The creation of attractive shopping podiums and providing an unforgettable shopping experience to customers can eventually foster consumers' loyalty (Algharabat et al., 2020). According to Fang et al. (2015) attracted customers were more likely to click on advertising links, thereby increasing traffic and associated business activities. Consumers can easily engage in a brand or firm via the adoption of smart mobile devices for marketing and communication. The widespread consumer adoption of smart mobile devices, has a direct effect on consumer behavior, thereby calling for a change in the type of market environment (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Therefore, small businesses need to include SMM, as it is essential for the effective engagement of consumers.

Chakravarty et al. (2014) stated that 80% of 24 small businesses have depended on satisfied customers via shopping purchasing experience. These satisfied customers are more likely to positively view the firm, repeat business transactions, and spread word-of-mouth content (Chen & Chen, 2014). Close connection with customers increases the flexibility of small businesses in improving their market position (Kajalo & Lindblom, 2015). Therefore, developing strategies that can effectively engage customers is a key concern for marketers. Rad et al. (2015) stated that the perspectives of customers and the communication value is crucial for marketers. An effective consumer engagement strategy is significantly beneficial in the realization of the outcomes of brand performance such as brand loyalty, reduced operational costs, sales growth, superior

profitability, positive word-of-mouth, and brand referrals (Dwivedi, 2015; Fang, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2019; Singh & Srivastava, 2019). An effective implemented SMM strategy may improve consumer engagement via the spread of positive WOM.

Word-of-Mouth Communication

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is sharing information and/or rumor between individuals (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019). The authors also stated that WOM conversations have a higher influence on consumer behavior than traditional advertising or media. Word-of-mouth is an effective advertising means of transmitting information to target audiences (Levy & Gvili, 2015). Negative WOM harms consumers' behaviors towards the brand, product, or service, while positive WOM motivates the target audience to engage with the brand. Generally, WOM provides firms with valuable customer feedback concerning products or services, usage, and consumer characteristics (Bond et al., 2019). Marketers can motivate WOM by offering free products or services, discounts, and portraying a favorable self-image. According to Chen (2017), consumers are more likely to spread positive and useful WOM to recipients about interesting products. Therefore, the highest value of motivating positive WOM is to satisfy consumers (Pauwels et al., 2016).

Akrout and Nagy's (2018) study on brand trust and commitment revealed that satisfied consumers turn to have a high level of engagement leading to a strong brand relationship and the spread of positive WOM. Positive WOM increased brand trust, brand commitment, and quality of consumer-brand-relationship, which, in turn, increases WOM (Akrout & Nagy, 2018). Positive WOM is vital for a small business with limited resources. Bond et al. (2019) described it as an unpaid form of advertising, where

consumers talk about products, services, and brands, make recommendations, and spread WOM content. Men and Tsai (2015) suggested that the interaction and engagement of consumers on social media sites positively enhanced business relationships with interested audients. Companies manage the relationships of consumers in multichannel communication settings, by creating the right number and type of touchpoints to give customers an enjoyable positive experience along with their customer journey (Gill et al., 2017; Lambrecht & Misra, 2017). Facebook brand pages for many firms represent a vital touch for beginning and maintaining customer relationships via electronic word of mouth (Dessart, 2017).

Electronic Word-of-Mouth Communication

Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is a positive and negative report, or any written form of communication spread through the internet and social media about a product, service, or brand made by actual and potential customers. (Erkan & Evans, 2016; Filieri & McLeay, 2013). Communication via eWOM includes personal WOM and commercial WOM. There are various ways to do eWOM, such as via site reviews, email, websites, blogs, instant messaging, online communities, chatrooms, newsgroups, hate sites, and social networking sites (Badrul Hisham et al., 2020). Social media provide consumers with an interactive platform with each other, which produced eWOM and provided free advertising by sharing brand content and promoting image (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019). The use of social media to like, post, share, and comment increased the visibility of consumers' brand engagement and influenced their friends and followers to engage in eWoM (Haikel-Elsabeh et al., 2019).

User engagement is a behavioral demonstration that enforces motivation for a consumer to attach to a brand beyond using it (Abusamhadana et al., 2019). Consumers create awareness to increase adoption of innovation and brand sale by sharing positive experiences about new innovations with family, friends, and brand audients. Business managers should leverage eWOM by communicating effectively with firms' target audience by guiding consumer discussions according to the company's mission and marketing goals. Shrestha et al. (2019), postulated that eWOM communication via social media about choices of health clinics that provide oral and maxillofacial service communities improve awareness and brand trust of oral and maxillofacial surgery (OMS) clinic. Businesses with positive eWOM connected social media and social media content marketing increased consumers' awareness when choosing health clinics that provide OMS, which is a drive to brand trust and consumer brand commitment (Shrestha et al., 2019). The key propositions of SMM strategy that foster awareness, promote eWOM, and help to engage consumers are content marketing and connected social media strategy.

Social Media Content Marketing Strategy

Social media content marketing (SMCM) refers to a brand's information medium via which consumers gain information about the brand (Ahmad et al., 2016). Harris and Rae (2009) revealed that the purpose of social media use in content creation is for marketing and the management of customer relationships. Kilgour et al. (2015) found that content marketing is an effective factor in consumer engagement and media sharing in spaces of interest. Shrestha et al. (2019) revealed that SMM content is a generator of high traffic on a website; therefore, SMCM has a leading voice in firms, and a significant

amount of social media users are using content. With the power of social media, it is convenient for marketers to cover large customer bases to hear their voices.

Small business managers have started to recognize the potential impact of SMM (Gümüs & Kütahyali, 2017), yet they still encounter challenges in exploiting them effectively (Fink et al., 2018). SMEs' limited marketing knowledge, time, financial, and human resources were the main constrain for SMM content creation (Gould & Nazarian, 2018). These limitations hinder the adoption of new technology, such as the SMM initiation (Broekemier et al., 2015). In marketing, the new dynamic environment requires an interactive communication style, constant attention, and content creation. Small businesses usually underestimate the concentrated labor and time needed for content creation (O'Dwyer et al., 2009).

Burgess (2016) emphasized that the creation of rich content in SMM is crucial to attract attention and convert and engage a consumer to a brand. Gümüs and Kütahyali (2017) showed that SMM is an opportunity for SMEs to lure customers at a reasonably low cost, and more SMEs are getting to adopt this marketing technique. However, the creation of rich content remains a significant challenge for SMEs, as limited resources influence SME processes and determine their SMM content (Kraus, et al., 2019). Small businesses can overcome these barriers and succeed in content marketing by a consistent distribution of valuable content to the firm's target audience to drive the reaction of a profitable customer (Kraus et al., 2019). Businesses can succeed in converting, retaining, and engaging customers by regularly and timely managing their content quality.

Small business managers can engage consumers in SMCM by involving customers and employees in SMM content creation, by actively reaching consumers via prizes, tags, and giveaways, and developing content SMM regular and timely schedule (Broekemier et al., 2015; Nevin & Torres, 2012). Pollák and Dorčák (2016) revealed that contents posted between 8 p.m. and midnight attracted the highest number of Likes than contents posted between noon and 4 p.m. Shrestha et al. (2019) stated that to improve information delivery SMCM stresses the importance of usefulness, quality, validity, and positively directing brand-consumer interaction. Kraus et al. (2019) added that it is vital for SMEs to choose an appropriate style of communication and to ensure that the SMM content is vibrant, entertaining, trustworthy, and connected with the content of other social media platforms. Effective managers and marketers seek for excellent content and robust social media connectivity to increase traffic and brand trust.

Connected Social Media Strategy

Connected Social Media is a new social network strategy used to attract, engage, and retain consumers by establishing brand trust among social media users via the use of multiple social media platforms. Shrestha et al. (2019) in a study of patient choices of health clinics in Australia, showed that connected social media enhance and inspire buzz in any operation. In communication, the high levels of emotional content encouraged robust brand relationships (Hahn et al., 2016). Brands with sufficient information provided by multiple social media podiums have enough evidence for the attractiveness of the service through significant amounts of information, and people are likely to trust the brand. Shrestha et al. (2019) used connected social media and hashtag campaigns to

spread innovation, create awareness, and generate high traffic in consumer health discussions. Small businesses should effectively develop and implement connected social media to create brand awareness and improve consumer engagement.

When developing and implementing social media strategies, a firm should select platforms that match their target audience, align their strategies across platforms, allocate governance responsibility, develop accessible and integrated or connectivity activity across all media and develop risk management policies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Reilly & Hynan, 2014). Öztürk and Batum (2019) stipulated that SBMs should use a connected social media strategy by aligning brand content when using multiple social media platforms to build awareness, trust, and improve consumers' engagement. Shrestha et al. (2019) study of patient choices of health clinics in Australia, showed that users prefer social media tools, that are actively used, trusted, and with many links. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube are among the most used social media tool.

When implementing a connected social media strategy, firm content on the chosen platforms should also match the audience and be frequently updated. Shrestha et al. (2019) illustrated that social media users preferred to use Facebook as a source of stories of previous brand success stories. Social media users preferred Twitter for ads, news, and promotions, as well as creating awareness through hashtags. Öztürk and Batum (2019) stipulated that brands should preferably use LinkedIn for brand introduction, exhibiting content to create a brand image and improve consumer engagement. Lepkowska-White et al., (2019) showed that the different social media platforms used, the intensity, variety, or frequency, variety of SMM activities, and integration or

connectivity of activities are vital as these might influence consumer perceptions of brand equity.

Advantages of Using Social Media Platforms

When small businesses take advantage of existing social media platforms, they can create new business strategies and adapt marketing strategies to positively engage consumers, increase revenue, and remain competitive (Felix et al., 2017). The advantages using of social media tools included consumer self-support, sharing of information between consumers and the firm, referrals, increased brand, product, or service awareness, reduce operation cost, increase consumers' satisfaction, brand loyalty and increase purchase (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Sajid, 2016).

Business managers could use social media tools to improve the understanding of consumers (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018). Marketing and business managers often use consumer feedback on platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, to track current and future purchases via consumer-provided status updates, which managers might use to develop and implement strategies that motivate consumers' engagement and retention (Sashi et al., 2019).

Social media was found to be advantageous to businesses for virtual communication, sale promotion, direct marketing, low-cost marketing, publicity collaboration on projects, writing blogs and microblogs, and networking in personal and professional sceneries (Perčić & Perić, 2021). The use of social media applications was observed to have enhanced the performance of business communication and collaboration, which increased business performance and was customizable to suit the

business objectives of a company (Sajid, 2016). Financially, Buhalis and Mamalakis (2015) showed a 656% increase in return on capital after 14 months of the study of social media activities in the Princess Andriana Hotel in Rhodes, Greece.

Buhalis and Mamalakis (2015) designated the nonfinancial benefits of using social media platforms for business activities as improved product reach, customers' engagement, and high brand recognition. The study of Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) on small restaurants in the US showed that social media platforms are sources of providing reliable business information. The authors concluded that ignoring social media for only a week might be detrimental to the business, especially in case any problem occurred during the period. The empirical study of marketing innovation might increase understanding of how and why SBMs adopt SMM (Fityan & Huseynov, 2018). Since the main source of small business profit comes from target audients with a positive psychological attitude and high social approval, managers should develop and implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement (Zaitseva et al., 2019).

Transition

In section 1, the business problem leading this study, the purpose statement, the central research question, and the selected method and design most appropriate for my research from the precedent studies were examined. I explained the conceptual framework and continued with the definitions, assumptions, limitations, and a transitory analysis of the significance of the study concerning developing and implementing SMM strategies of small businesses in Maryland, United States. The section ended with a broad review of existing professional and academic literature from studies and articles that are

associated with why and how small businesses adopt SMM strategies. Section 2 consists of the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the sample of the study, and the research method and design. This section will continue with the discussion of ethical research, data collection, and data analysis. The conclusion in this section was drafted by measures to enhance the reliability and validity of the study.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. The specific study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. The business impact to the organizations may include the potential for SBMs to have a better understanding of social media and be able to develop and implement SMM strategies to engage consumers effectively and bring about business growth. The implication of positive social change to the community is business growth, which could result in increased employment and tax revenues, poverty reduction, leading to an improved living standard for the people in local communities.

Role of the Researcher

Maintaining rigor and credibility throughout the research is a vital component in this research study. Qualitative research methods versatility permits the researcher to obtain reliable findings within a variety of methodologies that align with the purpose of the ongoing research (Yin, 2018). The role of researchers in a qualitative case study is in capturing the knowledge and experience of the participants. In this study, my ethical research association with participants in the field was of paramount importance for an effective conclusion. Masud (2018) suggested that the ethical position of the researcher, as well as the attitude, describes the means to derive scientific knowledge, and the definition of objects' relationships along with the research goals influence the scope of the study and the researcher's path. De Mooy and Yuen (2017) stipulated that ethics is a

necessary part of research discussion. In an organizational study, the concept of reflexivity has always been part of qualitative research methods and is a significant part of data analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). I protected the trustworthiness of the data from reflexivity-generated bias by using other sources of evidence to supplement the primary data as represented by participant insights and to search for contrary evidence diligently.

Matta (2019) mentioned that the role of the researcher is to collect, organize, and analyze data. As the key instrument for data collection, my role was to select participants, organize interviews, examine company documents, analyze data collected, interpret the findings, and report the results. Marshall and Rossman (2016) posited that to improve the trustworthiness and mitigate biases of the findings, researchers must avoid selecting participants with whom there is a working or personal relationship. Participated with whom I was associated with them via work or personally were not selected to mitigate biases and improve the credibility of the results.

When dealing with human subjects, the ethical guidelines from Belmont Report (BR) protocol was used. The three basic ethical principles of BR are respect of person, justice, and benevolence. All three principles were applied when interacting with participants. Effective reflexivity management was conducted to evaluate my positioning role as the researcher. In a qualitative study, the ability of the researcher to effectively execute self-evaluation, identify the effectiveness of the research inquiry, and findings by positionality determine the accuracy and trustworthiness of the study (FitzPatrick, 2019). Participants were not influenced improperly but took either a position of empathy or

apathy toward the participants' experiences. In-depth interviews were conducted, and other data collection methods were implemented, such as observation and review company of documentations as purposed by methodological triangulation. In a multiple case study, an in-depth interview is considered a reliable method of data collection as it can offer and reveal themes when the researcher dialogues with the research participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Frequent data patterns were detected and categorized appropriately.

All forms of bias that may influence the results of the research were detected and tackled. Marshall and Rossman (2016) noted that even though researchers have a personal interest in a topic, they should avoid demonstrating any bias in the study. When describing the study to participants, bias was avoided, and each participant was separately accepted as a case study, which will further be used for case comparison. During data collection, neutrality was maintained by watching against any body language that can influence the respondents. A qualitative researcher also plays the role of an observer, which includes choosing images and artifacts, handling, note-taking, studying, interpreting data according to the research design, and keeping all participant information such as real names and identities confidential was vital during data collection. Chongo et al. (2018) stated researchers might use markers, take pictures, and pattern all external and internal documents. Employing bracketing methods was vital in mitigating assumptions and curtailing biases in the process of data collection.

Participants

Qualitative researchers understand that some sources of research informants or participants have a better position to provide compelling insight and resources than others. Schrag (2017) stated that before date collection, researchers base their participants' recruitment on participants' characteristics, which aligns with the overarching research question. Several researchers have suggested that valuable insights must come from participants who have appropriate experiences that relate to the overarching research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) stated that the willingness of a participant to partake in a study is vital.

Researchers should employ suitability criteria in the selection of knowledgeable and willing participants who can offer relevant data on the research topic (Idri, 2016). The key criteria for inclusion in this study was that participants must be small business managers, owners, or marketing managers who have successfully developed and implemented SMM strategies to engage consumers. Thus, I chose participants who met the following eligibility criteria: (a) small business owners or managers, in Maryland, (b) willing to participate, and (c) have successfully developed and implemented an SMM strategy. I identified six SBMs or owners from three different small businesses who have successfully develop and implement a SMM strategy to contact for the study. Neale et al. (2014), noted that obtaining access to participants involves a combination of hard work, strategic planning, and luck.

Researchers often receive authorization from a gatekeeper within an organization to carry out research (Gülmez et al., 2016). A gatekeeper is an individual within a firm

who controls an investigator's access to research (Gülmez et al., 2016). Gatekeepers must make decisions that ensure the welfare of the people and the company they stand in for (Whicher et al., 2015). Small Business owners and top managers were the main participants recruited; therefore, the chances of encountering gatekeepers who may restrict access to potential participants is minimal. Prospective participants were identified, and each small business owner or top manager was contacted directly via email with a letter of recruitment.

The participant recruitment letter is a description of the nature and importance of the study. Powell et al. (2016) stated that after ascertaining the eligible participants for the study, researchers should offer an invitation letter to the participants. While sending the recruitment letter, I included the informed consent form which entailed the description and procedure of the study; the time limit; the possible risk and benefits of participation; a statement of voluntary participation, and no consequences for refusal; the option to withdraw; and confidentiality rights. The interested participants were requested to sign the informed consent form.

Hirschberg et al. (2014) stated that building trust required instituting a working rapport with participants and their participation decision in a study. Puig et al. (2015) noted that it is vital to establish trust by creating a positive relationship with participants. A working relationship with each participant was created by communication via email, virtual communication devices, and phone. Yin (2018) suggested that to observe a case study protocol effectively, and a researcher must build a working relationship with

participants. My constant communication with the participants entails an explanation of the reason and significance of my study to clarify any doubts and obtain their support.

Research Method and Design

A qualitative multiple case study is beneficial in obtaining profound perceptions of the small business owners and managers on effective SMM strategies. Multiple case study allows an in-depth description and analysis of two or more cases, which a researcher can use to investigate dissimilarities in cases and to grasp undeniable facts (Yin, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. Qualitative approach research is appropriate when the researcher intends to thoroughly explore and obtained an exhaustive understanding of how individuals or groups place meaning to a human or social issue (Corti & Fielding, 2016). Researchers use a case study to systematically explore and obtain an exhaustive understanding of a specific inquire in a natural environment (Morgan et al., 2017).

Research Method

The research methodology that was used for this study is qualitative, with a multiple case study method and design. Researchers use qualitative methods to explain how and why interpretive approaches are used to interpret, translate, decode, accept the meaning of specific phenomena, and without representing the frequency of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Employing a qualitative research approach is vital in acquiring a deep understanding of my business problem by using different data sources. Practically, qualitative researchers use in-depth approaches, which involve collecting and analyzing

data using interviews, focus groups, case study, assembling, observation, and action research (Holloway & Galvin, 2016; Starcher et al., (2018). Qualitative methods are vital for researchers who want to use probe questions to collect an in-depth and more philosophical understanding of specific circumstances from the participant's experience (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The use of probe questioning and recording devices are also employed in qualitative research to clarify any uncertainties and achieve a high level of substantial validity (Matta, 2019).

Quantitative researchers employ precise measurement by using a rigorous and controlled model to assess phenomena (Bryman, 2016). Quantitative researchers examine the connections between numeric variables, test hypotheses via trials and surveys, and test theories by evaluating statistical data (Yin, 2018). Quantitative researchers lack the opportunity to comprehend a phenomenon in depth (Rendle-Short, 2019). I chose qualitative methods over quantitative research to deeply comprehend a phenomenon.

The mixed research methodology was not appropriate for this study. Mixed-method approaches include the in-depth study of phenomena related to qualitative methods and a combination of experimental testing linked with quantitative methods (Hesse-Biber, 2015). Mixed-method researchers take advantage of the benefits offered from the invocation of qualitative and quantitative methods (Zhang et al., 2020). However, mixed approaches were not used for this study due to the lack of hypotheses to test the underlying attributes or relationships between variables. The mixed method is appropriate when exploring qualitative aspects as well as examining the quantitative factors of a phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Therefore, qualitative research is suitable for this

study as I explored in-depth the experiences of SBMs in developing and implementing effective SMM strategies.

Research Design

Phenomenology, ethnography, and case study designs are considered predominantly qualitative research designs (Ingham-Broomfield, 2016). Researchers employ case studies to investigate a current phenomenon and help comprehend the real-time context of an experience (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Yin, 2018). Case studies offer researchers the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews, where they can observe sign language and verbally probe the interviewee to receive deep data from feedback (Yin, 2018). Researchers use case studies design to answer how and why a phenomenon exists and to achieve possible outcomes to the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). Case study researchers who collect data from multiple sources provided a more comprehensive analysis of research questions, which increased the credibility of the findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, I applied a multiple case study design to establish a more comprehensive evaluation and complete insight into the business problem in real life using multiple sources.

Phenomenological and ethnographic designs are not appropriate for this study because of the attributes and goals related to each. Researchers who employ a phenomenological design, do so to focus on the respondent's perspective of a situation or event concerning their life experience (Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). The use of participants' lived experiences is an intrusive means to explore data on a business issue (Dante, 2015). Phenomenological design studies are best for exploring human affective

behavior, intensely social, and shared social phenomenon experiences (Matta, 2019), which is not the goal of this study.

De Chesnay and Abrums (2015) postulated that ethnographic research is referred to as a design, which involves close observation of people in their ecological environments. Researchers employ ethnographic research design to observe cultures, groups, and organizations, closely (Crandall et al., 2016). The use of ethnographic techniques entails an extended period of observation of cultural groups (Dalmer, 2019). The ethnographic technique was not used for this study because exploring live experiences data of culture from participants is unsuitable for business study. Therefore, a multiple case study design was employed with the purposed of having credible, in-depth data as I conducted multiple interviews until data saturation was reached.

Data saturation occurs when the researchers' efforts to collect additional data do not result in new information (Tran et al., 2017). Data saturation is that stage where, after conducting multiple interviews, the subsequent participants offer no new information to the already provided information from the previous interviewees. In this stage of data saturation, the further interviews that were conducted yielded diminishing returns in the quality information, repetitions, and redundancy in the information This signifies a need to stop the process and that the quest for data saturation has been fulfilled. Researchers can reach data saturation by probing participants, adding the number of participants, and engaging participants in member checking, and engagement of methodological triangulation (Baškarada, 2014). Qualitative researchers add depth to data by employing triangulation (Denzin, 2012). The rich, in-depth data collection provides a direct

connection between triangulation and data saturation (Fusch, et al., 2018). To reach data saturation, I conducted semi-structured interviews, asked probing questions for more clarity during interviews, involved the participants in member checking, and employed methodological triangulation. Data were collected until no additional new data was obtained and no new themes or patterns were found.

Population and Sampling

In the general concept of research sampling in the study of Wirtz et al. (2017), sampling is the foundation of research integrity. Despite the methodology employed, the decision to select a sampling method for this study was to maximize validity and efficiency. In this multiple case study, I searched for depth understanding of the view of SBMs or owners in Maryland who have successfully develop and implement a SMM strategy to improve consumers' engagement. Purposeful sampling was employed to identify and select six SMM knowledgeable and experienced participants. Qualitative researchers widely use purposeful sampling techniques for identifying and selecting participants or groups of participants who are especially experienced or knowledgeable about a phenomenon of interest (Boddy, 2016). In addition to knowledge and experience, a purposeful sampling includes critical points like participants' availability, willingness, and articulate communication ability (Spradley, 1976; Zhang et al., 2017). Several researchers have found that using purposeful sampling increased the credibility and efficiency of studies (Diedricks et al., 2018). Researchers identify participants using purposeful sampling to improve the trustworthiness of data collected through interviews (Van Rijnsoever, 2017).

Valerio et al. (2016) stated that the alternate purposeful sampling methods employed by researchers are convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling techniques are choices which researchers make to use specific sampling approaches and strategies to identify individuals who fit their study criteria (Wall Emerson, 2021). Convenience sampling is vital to recruiting participants with ease and convenience (Valerio et al., 2016). For example, Aktin (2019), employed convenience sampling because the sample location was easily accessible. Convenience sampling was inappropriate in this study because SBMs who were easy to locate and conveniently available may not have had the relevant expert knowledge needed in this qualitative case study. The snowball sampling method is a sampling technique in a direct social environment where already recruited participants designate new respondents (Bailey, 2019). Snowball sampling is vital when finding difficulties in recruiting participants (Valerio et al., 2016). However, snowball sampling was not suitable for this study since I did not interview participants in a direct social environment via sociometric questions (Audemard, 2020).

The study entailed the use of purposeful sampling to reach a specialized population of owners and top managers of small businesses in Maryland with a record of employing SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. I conducted semi-structured interviews to obtain depth data from participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deep data from participants. Researchers should select a suitable interview setting to ensure participants' comfort, confidentiality, and a favorable setting for uninterrupted interview dialog (Dodds & Hess, 2020; Ecker, 2017). Interviews took

place in a comfortable location that was agreed upon for the convenience of each participant, such as the participants' office or the library's meeting room or video conferencing interview through Zoom, Skype, or Google meeting.

As the researcher, I conducted six in-depth individual face-to-face or video conferencing interviews with the participants recruited. Schram (2006) suggested that for a qualitative study, a rage of five to 10 participants was appropriate as a larger sample size could be a hindrance to an in-depth exploration of the studied phenomena. In a social media strategy research that business managers use to increase sales (Ezeife, 2017), intentionally selected five participants. Dean (2019) conducted a qualitative case study with six participants to explore the SMM strategies used by small retail business owners to improve sales. Therefore, the use of six participants in this study was justifiable from prior studies conducted by Dean, Ezeife, and Schram because of the similarities in the topic, scope, method, and design. Following the interviews, I reviewed the firms' SMM strategies records and annual and consumer reports to validate participants' responses.

Ethical Research

Ethical researchers protect themselves and their participants by obtaining signed informed consent from participants before collecting data via interviews, observation, or experiments (Eisnecker & Kroh, 2017). To abide by ethical research standards outlined in the Belmont Report and Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol, researchers must obtain informed consent from participants (Grady, 2015). Participants should receive enough information about the research to make an informed decision (Allen, 2019). Before conducting the semi-structured interviews with participants, permission

was obtained from Walden's IRB to identify, select, contact, interview the participants and the informed consent was obtained from the participants. Each participant was given the personal contact information, including the informed consent form with a detailed introduction to the study, the risks and benefits, and guidelines of participating in the research. Participants participated in the study voluntarily and without any form of monetary compensation. An additional email was sent to inform each participant who chose to withdraw from participating in notifying me via my email, telephone, or in-person.

Walden University's IRB mandates ethical research practices to ensure researchers protect participants from unnecessary risk or harm. A researcher has the responsibility to protect the participant's identifiers (Oetzel et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers should employ code names to enhance the confidentiality of the identity of participants within the study – at all stages (Spillane et al., 2017). To maintain ethical protection, right, and confidentiality, all participants' identifiable information remained confidential. To enhance the confidentiality of the identity of participants; participants were coded as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6, for all records.

Griffith (2014) recommended all participant-related material and documents be secured for at least five years before disposing of them to ensure anonymity. Participants were informed that commencing from the official date of completion of the study, a fireproof safe was used to securely locked all notes taken, and audio recording devices, as well as a password-locked computer, were used to store all electronic data for five years. After the fifth year, all printed research records were shredded and incinerated destroyed,

while all electronic and digital files were permanently deleted using programmable

software such as KillDisk.

Sources of Data

Cypress (2017) stated that instrumentally, the ultimate qualitative research data

collection tool was the researcher. Castillo-Montoya (2016) listed some data collection

instruments as interviews (semi-structured interviews, in-depth phenomenological

interviews, focus groups), observations, and company documents. In multiple case

studies, researchers use multiple data collection forms to acquire credible and reliable

data to answer the study's research question (Yin, 2018). This study's face-to-face and

video conferencing, semi-structured interviews entailed the use of open-ended questions

and probes to explore the views of SBMs and owners of the SMM development and

implementation strategies, successes, and challenges in improving consumer engagement.

Face-to-face interviews help to maximize interviewer's contact with participants and

enhance more thorough, in-depth interviews to be conducted (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Interviewers can personally observe nonverbal cues and receive better quality responses.

Researchers should use a reflective journal during data collection to maintain a record

used all the data collection processes used (Larivière & Kandampully, 2019). I employed

a reflective journal to record notes and nonverbal cues from the participants during

interviews. Audio recordings were undertaken with the permission of the participants

during semi-structured interviews for the purpose of transcription.

Open-ended questions were asked to elicit thorough responses and improved

researchers' understanding (see Appendix A). The open-ended questions are beneficial

during an interview as they offer the researcher a better understanding of how a participant viewed a specific phenomenon (Roberts et al., 2019). To conduct reliable and valuable interview researchers should identify with the following (a) acquire IRB approval, (b) acquire the informed consent from each participant, (c) stay focused, (d) record the interview, (e) listen during the interview to ask follow-up questions when possible. Approval was obtained from Walden University's IRB (10-21-20-0738049) before contacting participants, acquire informed consent from each participant, using an audio recording device for accurate information during transcription of my findings, and asking probing follow-up questions to gain additional clarity during the interviews.

Amankwaa (2016) stated that researchers employ an interview protocol to enhance the interview process consistency and to increase data collection credibility. To conduct the semi-structured interviews, an interview protocol was carefully followed to safeguard a consistent and credible interview process (see Appendix D). Researchers use member checking to offer the participants the opportunity to validate the researcher's interpretation of their responses to the open-ended interview questions and any follow-up or probing questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Researchers use member checking to improve dependability and credibility and to reach data saturation (Yin, 2018). I transcribed the audio recordings from the interviews, explored the transcripts, generated a one-to-two-page summary of the participants' interview responses. A transcript of the interview findings was developed and shared with each participant for member checking to ensure accurate transcription of their intentions and to enhance interviews' data dependability. A follow-up 30-minute meeting with the participant was held as a

technique to ensure transcript review and to ask additionally for more clarification. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that a follow-up interview is a technique used by qualitative researchers to guarantee the transcript of each participant is member-checked while probing for extra data. The transcript was revised based on the participants' review of the transcripts.

Data Collection Sources

Yin (2018) stated that the data collection approaches used in qualitative research included interviews that allowed the participants to offer information outside the interview questions. Vass et al. (2017) postulated that interviews are an ideal technique to collect data about a phenomenon from the participant's perspective. Qualitative study researchers seek rich, in-depth data from the participant's viewpoint; therefore, the main data collection techniques used by qualitative researchers are semistructured interviews and face-to-face interviews (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Vass et al., 2017). I adhered to the same interview construct that entails semistructured and face-to-face or video conference interviews consisting of predetermined questions (see Appendix A) to gain a rich insight into the participants' SMM strategies.

Advantages of using interviews as a data collection technique include (a) spontaneous responses (b) noting of social cues such as body language, voice tones, and eye contact, and (c) a cost-effective approach that obtains participants responses (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Zhang et al., 2017). There are accurate transcripts of the participants' responses from the electronic recording of the interviews (Weil, 2017). In 2017, Weil also stated that the disadvantages of the process of face-to-face interviews

include (a) misinterpretation of social cues, (b) malfunctioning of the recording device, and (d) the ability for researchers to proactively listen and instantaneously record and interpret deep responses. I obtained the contact information for participants through public sources like LinkedIn and contacted each participant through email to introduce myself, state the reason for the study, and strive to build rapport.

When selecting an interview setting, researchers should choose settings that are comfortable for the participants when conducting interviews (Scheibe, et al., 2015). Participants chose a comfortable location for the interview to be conducted, of which I suggested a nearby public library, the participant's office, or video conferences such as Zoom, Skye, or Google meet. Researchers who follow a set construct for interviews can maintain rigor often and achieve a trustworthy interview process (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). An interview protocol was followed during the interviews to improve the research consistency and as a technical guide before, during, and after each interview (see Appendix D).

Some researchers carry out a small pilot study to test the instruments and techniques planned for a future bigger study (Lancaster, 2015). A pilot study is a way for researchers to test research protocols, authenticate self-designed questionnaires, and determine the reliability of data collection techniques in preparation for a future larger study (Drummond, 2017). In conducting a qualitative case study of limited scope and scale, I did not conduct a small pilot study because conducting a larger subsequent study was not necessary. Researchers give participants a chance to validate the researcher's transcript and evaluate their interview responses by engaging in member checking (Birt et

al., 2016). To ensure accurate transcription of the participants' responses to interview questions, each participant was engaged in member checking. I obtained validation, additional clarity, as well as new information from participants via member checking. Member checking is the process of sharing an interview transcript with participants to examine the accuracy, amend or expand the findings (Brear, 2018). All notes and any audio recording tracks are locked in a fireproof safe and password access protected computer, where the study files will be warehoused for five years from the official completion date of the study. The data will then be destroyed by shredding all printed material and deleting all electronic data permanently with the use of software like KillDisk to ensure all proper protection of participants' identities.

Data organization is critical to researchers as it eases the data analysis process (Yin, 2018). Roberts et al. (2019) suggested that researchers should organized data using a database for easy retrieval. Qualitative multiple case study researchers collect data from multiple sources (Baškarada, 2014). Researchers should employ computer software programs to organize different data from multiple sources (Chowdhury, 2015). In this study interview transcripts were organized with Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel was used to create a data-tracking database. NVivo$^{12.0}$ software program was used in this study to organize further the interview transcript and data collected from company documents as it coded and categorized the information needed for data analysis. Ethical researchers maintain the participants' confidentiality by averting the use of any personal identifiers of participants within the published research paper (Rowlands et al., 2015).

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, I created a file and used a unique code of P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6, each assigned to 1 of the 6 participants within the published study. Each participant had an assigned file using a number rather than a name or other identifying information. Maintaining secure custody of all research records is the critical activity of ethical researchers (Rowlands et al., 2015). I secured hard copy files of the interview transcripts, notes, and audio or video recordings were stored in a secured container. After 5 years, all printed material will be shredded and electronically data deleted permanently to ensure appropriate disposal and participants' identities protection.

Data Analysis

Data analysis consisted of interconnectivity, organization, and description of the phenomena (Alase, 2017). In qualitative studies, data analysis is a set of processes that researchers undertake to understand the deeper meaning of raw data (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). Qualitative case study researchers conducting data analysis must rigorously and thoroughly analyze the processes employed to ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings (Roberts et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers maintain rigor while performing data analysis using an explanatory, content analysis process (Tuapawa, 2017). Content analysis was employed by analyzing the interview transcript's forms, and the member checking results by constant comparison, data reduction process, and thematic analysis brings out the primary and subthemes that emerge from the analysis of the interviews.

Thematic analysis is a qualitative research model used by researchers to transform raw data into common themes (Davidson et al., 2017). Assarroudi et al. (2018) stated that

thematic analysis is used to make sense of interview findings by coding open-ended questions and comparing the answers from the different respondents using the matrix. Thematic analysis was used to convert the data collected from the interview onto common themes by coding the questions and using a matrix to compare the data from each respondent. Researchers who employ thematic analysis obtain a profound insight, which helps understand the fundamental concepts and, subsequently, the broader aspects of the text (Vaismoradi, et al., 2016).

Methodological triangulation is another technique used to thoroughly analyze data and reach data saturation by which researchers interconnect data to confirm the dependability and validity (Roberts et al., 2019). Triangulation involves using different sources, theories, methods, and exploration to provide substantiating evidence of the interview findings and the study subject (Yin, 2018). During the data analysis process, I used the triangulation technique to systematically review the company's documentation data such as content marketing editorial calendar, customer buying journey map, and SMM customer journey survey, findings from interviews, analyzing each theme to improve credibility and dependability. There are five phases of the data analysis process, which include the compilation of the data disassembling, reassembling, interpretation, and conclusion of data (Yin, 2018). The following section is Yin's five-phase process, which was used to analyze data collected from semi-structured interviews to documentation review and conclusion.

Compiling Data

Cassell and Bishop (2019) designated that the intention of the compiling phase of data analysis is for the researcher to organize the raw data into a database. Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) stipulated that during the compilation phase, researchers must transform raw data into written text form. Yin (2018) stated that the compiling process begins with the gathering of data and sorting. The compilation phase of the data analysis started immediately after transcribing all interview recordings, involving participants in member checking, and appraising company documents.

My findings were reviewed, and results were triangulated against peer-reviewed literature and authoritative industry reports to establish reliability and validity. The findings were explored considering the DOI theory. Maher et al. (2018) stated that it is vital for researchers to establish reliability and validity before using NVivo software. During this phase, the data was compiled using Microsoft Word and Excel before using NVivo12.0 software in the disassembly phase.

Disassembling Data

In the disassembling phase, researchers divide the compiled data into smaller fragments by coding or assigning labels, and making notes (Yin, 2018). The data was organized in a logical order with the use of NVivo$^{12.0}$ software. Next, I created notes to disassemble the data into small groups and begin the coding and labeling the notes. Researchers should disassemble data into manageable and logical groups (Tuapawa, 2017). Thirdly, themes or categories were generated based on the relationship and frequency of occurrence of codes and nodes. Therefore, data was grouped based on

relationships among codes, frequency of the codes, or fundamental concepts based on a combination of codes in the NVivo12.0 system. Cassell and Bishop (2019) stated that the generation of the core occurs in the process of grouping themes of data fragments and nodes. The next phase started with electronic thematic grouping as I reassembled the data fragments and nodes. Data were grouped based on relationships among codes, frequency of the codes, or fundamental concepts based on a combination of codes in the NVivo12.0 system. Cassell and Bishop (2019) stated that the generation of the core occurs in the process of grouping themes of data fragments and nodes. The next phase began with electronic thematic grouping as I reassembled the data fragments and nodes.

Reassembling Data

Reassembling is the thematic organization's phase, classification, and clustering of the disassembled data fragments into graphical groups, which may result in the creation of lists, tables, and graphs (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). NVivo12.0 system was used to thematically cluster the data fragments to begin the classification process that emerges themes and patterns. Kornbluh (2015) stated that the researcher could develop a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon by grouping data based on themes and patterns. Woods et al. (2016) suggested that during the assembling phase, the coding process should be logical and consistent for the data to be harmonious and avoid disorganized themes and patterns. I consistently rechecked the coding process and ensured accurate theme and pattern grouping to facilitate data interpretation.

Interpreting Data

The interpretation of data is the phase where researchers generate a narrative with the use of the themes and patterns created during reassembling (Tuapawa, 2017). Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) demanded that researchers should be objective by avoiding involving personal biases and reject the yearning to include preconceived ideas concerning the outcomes. During the interpretation of data, I used the assembled data to objectively generate narratives and avoided inserting any personal bias or preconceived notions by making sure that all emergent themes originate from the data. To further avoid being subjective and increase credibility, I also linked the themes to the study's conceptual framework, Roger's diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 2003). Dodds and Hess (2020) noted that by using data interpretation, researchers explore the patterns and groupings to determine the primary themes and subthemes that emerge. Therefore, the principal themes and subthemes which emerged from exploring data patterns and grouping, helped to answer the study's central research question before concluding the data.

Concluding Data

In this phase, researchers use the interpreted data to draw substantial conclusions, which brings out the in-depth meaning of the data. (Yin, 2018; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2016). The data analysis was concluded using the interpreted narratives to provide deep and meaningful conclusions of the emergent themes and subthemes. I explored the processes and procedures to truthfully and accurately arrive at conclusions to ensure that the findings are credible and dependable. In concluding data analysis, objectivity was

maintained while finalizing the interpretation of all the data collected during interviews

and documentation review. Zhang and Wildemuth (2016) designated that the conclusions

of qualitative research must originate from the collected data and not a subjective

viewpoint of the study. I revisited previous phases, if necessary, to update data to ensure

the data analysis conclusion is accurately completed as recommended by (Yin, 2018).

During the five phases, methodological triangulation aided in reviewing and analyzing

interview data with the use of data documentation. Van Dijk et al. (2016) showed that the

use of methodological triangulation enhances credibility.

Software Plan

I used Microsoft Word and Excel to construct databases and organize data

collected from participants' interview responses, member checking, and document

reviews. Houghton et al. (2015) described NVivo as a computer-assisted, qualitative, data

analysis software as an excellent data analysis tool used by qualitative researchers.

NVivo is a trusted software program used by qualitative researchers to code data, identify

themes and patterns, manage and interpret data (Marshall et al., 2018; Wilk et al., 2019).

NVivo[12.0] software was used during data analysis to fragment and gather data, add codes

and labels, and analyze emergent themes and subthemes. The textual information was

imported into NVivo[12.0 to] analyze data after data collection from semi-structured

interviews and the review of documents.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are two critical research elements to deliberate on during

the process of designing, exploring, and judging the quality of the study (MacPhail et al.,

2016). According to (Joslin & Muller, 2016) the validity and reliability of measurement instruments impact the degree to which a researcher may understand something about the study's phenomenon and the level to which the researcher can draw profound conclusions from the data. Quantitative researchers determine reliability and validity via the use of statistics (Noble & Smith, 2015). Similar criteria for qualitative studies seek credibility and dependability of data, confirmability, and transferability of their research findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Yin, 2018). These criteria are not measurable and need to be established using qualitative methods such as member checking, data saturation, thematic analysis, and triangulation (Denzin, 2010; Yin, 2018).

Reliability

Spiers et al. (2018) stated that the foundation of reliability in qualitative research is from the idea of data adequacy, which makes it possible to show consistent support for one's analysis across participants. Reliability is the repetitive and consistent measures used to conduct case study research (Yin, 2018). Consistency in data collection and analysis error-free enhances the research reliability (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). Reliability was established using the same manner to conduct each interview as I adhere to a predesigned interview protocol (Appendix B).

As researchers extract data from the primary sources, the researcher must also validate their accuracy in terms of form and context with constant comparison (Farquhar et al., 2020) either alone or in the form of triangulation. Researchers use member checking, methodological saturation, and triangulation by providing participants with the findings for a review to confirm data accuracy (Robins & Eisen, 2017). I improved

reliability by engaging participants in member checking, thematic analysis, and triangulation by ensuring a thorough data review from interviewees' responses and firms' documentations to systematically analyze each theme to rigor. To attain qualitative research reliability, commonalities must occur between the different findings of multiple research studies (Onwugbuzie & Byers, 2014). The same data sources, data collection sources, organization, and data analysis steps were applied to ensured reliability. Interview responses and notes, together with a complete review of existing academic studies, were used to establish consistency.

Validity

Validity is associated with data appropriateness, making it possible to provide an accurate account of participants' experiences within and beyond the immediate context (Spiers et al., 2018). To ensure validity, researchers can use the member checking to permit participant's consent of the transcribed interview findings and the data interpretation. Next to thematic analysis can be employed to establish appropriate insights into the fundamental data concepts and instinctively the text sentiments in larger volumes (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Researchers can employ thematic models manually before using qualitative software for data analysis to process raw data into common themes (Davidson et al., 2017). I employed thematic analysis by first manually for common themes in the interview transcript and code according to the open-ended questions before using Nvivo software to create themes from the transcripts.

To advance with the establishment of validity, researchers provide triangulation using several data sources to authenticate the interview data (Kern, 2016). There are more

testimonials to authenticate the validity of interview data, including company documentation, field notes, behavioral and nonbehavioral, field notes (Kern, 2016). Researchers also use data saturation to ensure credibility (Birt et al., 2016). Data saturation occurs when additional data collection attempts do not produce new patterns, themes, or data (Tran et al., 2017). I ensured validity by employing member checking, thematic analysis, triangulation, and data saturation procedures. To establish validity in qualitative research, researchers should apply credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and confirmability to the study (Cassell & Bishop, 2019; Spiers et al., 2018).

Credibility

Credibility is the confidence that the truth gives to the research findings (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017). Credibility is a detailed investigation that collects high-quality data (Cassell & Bishop, 2019). Credibility is used by researchers to ensure that the study results reflect the participants' opinions and hold (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). To ensure credibility, researchers should engage peers and obtain their comments. Member checking is a critical process that a qualitative researcher uses to improve data credibility (FitzPatrick, 2019). After transcribing the data collected from the interview and before producing the final document, I engaged each participant in member checking to validate the transcribed interview data and qualify the interpretation.

Researchers can use thematic analysis models to compare, analyze and code participants' responses to open-ended questions to establish credible fundamental data concepts and eventually obtain validity of the study's findings (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Thematic analysis was applied by coding the open-ended questions and applying matrices to compare the different types of participants' answers as recommended by (Davidson et al., 2017). Another strategy used by qualitative researchers to establish credibility is triangulation (Yin, 2018). Methodology or data type triangulation was employed to explore sources and theories to validate the evidence. The use of triangulation may help reduce bias, maintain clear and transparent data interpretations as it cross-examines the truthfulness of the participants' responses (Levitt et al., 2017; Yin, 2018). Therefore, to ensure credibility, I compared data collected from participants' interview responses with firm documents and reviews from member checking. Data collected from participants was my only focus and devoid of biases, personal opinions, and all data was kept confidential.

Confidentiality

Oetzel et al. (2015) asserted that it is the researcher's responsibility to ethically protect all participants' identifiable. At all stages of the research process, researchers can employ code names to increase the confidentiality of the participants identifiable within the study (Spillane, et al., 2017). To enforce ethical protection, confidentiality, and rights, all participants' identifiable information was kept confidential; participants' identities were codenamed as P1 to P6, for all records at all stages of the study. All related documents and material of participants should be secured for at least five years before destroying it, to ensure confidentiality (Griffith, 2014). From the study's official completion date, a fireproof safe was used to lock all audio recording devices, hard drive copies of documents, and field notes, and all electronic data, stored in a password-locked

computer for five years. After five years, all printed research documents will be shredded and permanently destroyed, while all electronic files will be deleted permanently with the use of software such as KillDisk.

Dependability

Dependability is crucial in qualitative research and clarity of results for readers to understanding (FitzPatrick, 2019). To ensure dependability, researchers should remain objective, mitigate biases, and prevent adding their worldview during data collection and interpretation (Birt et al., 2016). Gonçalves et al. (2019) used methodological triangulation by systematically comparing the cases, data, and literature. During data analysis, I ensured dependability by using methodological triangulation to compare interview findings against data collected from peer-reviewed literature and company reports, and credible industry documents such as company annual reports and SBA advocacy reports. Farquhar et al. (2020) noted that researchers employ methodological triangulation and member checking to improve the data's dependability. Therefore, peer analysis was applied by engaging participants in member checking to ensure a precise transcription of the participant's interview responses.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which other researchers can relate and validate the finding of a study, or it could connote how the finds apply to the contexts or settings of other studies (Kalu & Bwalya, 2017). Transferability relates to the degree to which research exploration outcomes can be transferred beyond the research boundaries (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To ensure transferability, researchers offer a detailed

depiction of the data collection process, the study's population, and geographic

boundaries for readers to apply the findings to their setting or context ((Fusch & Ness,

2015). To establish transferability, information about the population, participants, and

geographic boundaries was provided alongside the methodological research method and

design. Secondly, a thorough explanation of several data collection sources and

procedures enabled the transferability of the study by readers to other settings. Finally, I

offered enough evidence to readers that could make the research result applicable to

different contexts, situations, times, and populations.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a constituent of validity that occurs during the process of record

decision, sampling, data collection, keeping of data sources, data analysis, and

conclusions (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). To endure confirmability, qualitative

researchers should ask probing questions of participants, ensure the concentration of

participants to interview questions and employ member checking (Natow, 2020).

Confirmability was established by conducting semistructured interviews, asking probing

questions to additionally clarifying interviews, and member checking. Yin (2018) stated

that qualitative researchers could obtain confirmability by ensuring a clear, organized,

and rational audit track during each research stage. Fusch and Ness (2015) added that

researchers could attain data saturation to ensure the findings' confirmability. I retained

the established audit track of the research process and reach data saturation, as data was

collected continuously until no new themes or patterns emerged.

Data Saturation

Data saturation is reached during data collection to enhance the credibility and dependability of the collected data (Mohajan, 2017). Researchers achieve data saturation when additional data collection efforts do not result in new data, themes, or patterns (Tran et al., 2017). I continuously collected interview data until no new idea, model, or themes emerged. Researchers may acquire data saturation via probing participants during the interview responses, involving the participants in member checking, multiple data collection sources, and employing methodological triangulation (Natow, 2020). Researchers use member checking for participants to confirm or adjust the transcript of their responses to the interview questions (Yin, 2018). The process of methodological triangulation helps researchers cross-check interview data with collected data from supporting documents (Spiers et al., 2018). Data were collected from several documents to evaluate interview findings to employ methodological triangulation. Data saturation was reached by conducting semistructured interviews, probing participants for additional clarification during the interviews, involving the participants in member checking, and collecting data from several documents to evaluate interview findings to employ methodological triangulation.

Transition and Summary

In Section 2, I described my role in the research, participant selection, and rationalized the choice of the research method and design that shaped and guided this study. The explanation of ethical research, data collection instruments, organization, and analysis techniques assisted me to determine how SBMs implement SMM strategies to

improve consumers' engagement. Section 2 closed with a description of the processes to ensure credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. Section 3 included research findings, application to professional practice, and recommendations of SMM strategies that SBMs might use the findings to improve consumers' engagement. Section 3 was concluded with the implications for social change and recommendations for further actions of the research study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative exploratory multiple case study was to explore the strategies that SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM strategies to improve consumers' engagement. The specific study population consisted of six business managers of six successful small businesses in Maryland. I used Yin's five-phase process and NVivo 12 software underpinned with the DOI to analyze semi-structured interviews and documentation to identify three themes: (a) content design and engineering, (b) platforms selection and implementation, and (c) leadership engagement and tools.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for this study was:

RQ: What strategies do SBMs use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumer engagement?

Eight semistructured interview questions and follow-up questions resulted in data saturation. Using Nvivo software, I identified various strategies using a thematic approach that I grouped under three major themes. Below are the themes and corresponding frequency from the interviews and company documents review.

Table 2

Frequency of Themes

Themes	N	Incidence
Risk and liquidity	66	39%
Top-down approach	58	34%
Investment approach	46	27%

Theme 1: Content Design and Engineering

The consensus of participants stated that customers' behavior fluctuates in the buying process. Therefore, according to the participants, content marketing in social media needs to be informative, persuasive, and engaging. P5 and P6 said that there are two types of content: informative and persuasive. According to P5, persuasive content consists of facts and emotion. P6 noted that persuasive content influence by appealing to logos, pathos, and ethos. For example,

Celebrity endorsement is ethos, philanthropic content result in empathy, and we call it emotional influence through patho*s*, and logos is about influencing consumers through facts about products and services.

P5 said that the informative marketin*g* content includes product description, deals, targeted message to segment, brand mention, and sponsorship. According to P5, in social media, informative and persuasive marketing content could result in customer engagement. P4 contended that the purpose of informative and persuasive marketing content is to improve customer engagement to connect to the brand.

Participants said that persuasive and informative marketing content comes in different forms, shapes, and sizes. Therefore, according to P1, marketers need a thorough review and consideration of content to improve its effectiveness. P1 stated the marketing content could be in the form of videos, live videos, company news, and market data. Additional marketing content could be photos, tips and tricks, events, polls, and surveys. Other marketing contents participants discussed includes behind the scenes, animations, interesting quotes, industry news, teaser, memes, and press release. According to

participants' messages within the content, timing and location will play a significant role in content effectiveness.

P3 said that the consumer engagement marketing content constitutes messaging strategies for customers to post and comment. P3 stated that the company's marketing content should allow customers to express an opinion. P3 leaders prompt customers to express opinions by probing their personalities through a poll and playing 'test your knowledge' games and asking a simple question. P4 posited that the marketing content needs to have functional appeal, experimental appeal, and emotional appeal. According to the participants, their SMM content varies throughout the product life cycle. For instance, various content constitutes humor, small talk, and price comparison. P3 said the marketing content in social media needs to be functional to grow sales, add value, engage customers, and extend brand name. When asked to expand customer engagement through content engineering, the P3 noted the content helps them get closer to customers through two-way dialogue.

P5 said, each social media platform has its own unique identity, so our content engineering needs to adaptive to the platform, meaning content needs to be friendly, trustworthy, and consistent.

All participants stated that the content needs to inspire and inform customers rather than just pushing customers.

P2 said, our approach is to shift from passive to the empowered customer through connectivity and customer choices.

When asked to define empowered customers, P2 said that customers now have constant access to smartphones. Consumers have more choices and control to access information. Therefore, the brand needs to earn customer loyalty by delivering values and understanding their needs.

Participants were unanimous in expressing that content varies depending on their marketing objectives. P3 company SMM utilizes the RACE concept in their marketing objectives. According to P3, the RACE stands for Reach, Act, Convert and Engage. The participant said that the RACE comprises the entire customer journey. The participant presented a customer journey map that provides a visual representation of buyers' journey. The map constitutes various touchpoints in buyers' journey and how the SMM interacts with buyers through social media. The mode of interaction as revealed in the document includes email, live chat, hangtags, and the use of other channels. P3 added, "We use paid media, owned media, earned media, other channels to reach customers." P3 said act means customers purchasing products using their social media, landing page, product page, and marketing automation. P3 concluded convert is about multiple selling, producing content, and converting indecisive customers to repeat customers. Finally, according to P3, engage converts lapsed customers to indecisive customers and ultimately turns into repeat customers.

Participants unanimously noted that the Covid-19 pandemic had affected their marketing approach as people's lifestyle has changed and customers are shopping more online than before. According to P4, the company brand adapted its content to Covid -19 while being sensitive to their customers. According to P6, During Covid-19, the company

leaders focus on retaining consumers through a positive brand image. When asked how leaders improve brand image, P6 said that customers are inclined towards authentic news and informative articles due to pandemics, so they do not add irrelevant ads, hard-selling, or bombard customers with advertisement. P6 stated that the social media platform needs to Sell, Serve, Speak, Save, and Sizzle. According to P6, selling refers to a distribution channel, which means adding value, speaking relates to communication to get closer to the customers, saving relates to the cost, and sizzle is about the value proposition. P6 stated that to learn about the customers' journey, the SMM routinely does surveys. P6 presented a document relating to the customer journey survey. The survey template had ten questionnaires to grasp customer experience in buying journey.

All customers supported the notion of engagement through word-of-mouth branding. The participating company leaders develop a conversation unit with their marketing message that their customers feel circulating in the social media. P3 posited that they have better success in selling products if their customers circulate their message. P4 noted that consumers consider what their friends and people in their network say about the company and its products. So, all participants use social media platforms to deliver a positive message because engaging customers through social media brings customers closer to the brand. Participants said through customer engagement, and the positives stories reached people outside of the customer base. P3 presented a document relating to social media engagement benchmarks across industries. The report revealed that the company has total engagement per post, indicating that the company's marketing leaders are catching up with industry standards when engaging customers in social media.

Participants stated that free giveaway attracts more customers. P5 said that from a marketing content perspective regarding the company's social media platform, the SBM provides voucher codes, restaurant offers, and regular deals in exchange for customers to tell their stories to funnel down to a larger audience. P5 handed a copy of vouchers and deals they provided to customers. The coupons and deals were suitable to their targeted demographic.

According to P1, The marketing content is important cause if we focus on our products or service, then we are talking in a language that would not resonate with our social media community.

P1 added, "But if we talk about the specific needs of our community and provide solutions or offer deals for them to save money, then it will resonate with people." P1 added that they see social media as a communication vehicle.

P2 said that their secret for business success is defining their segment and the quality of marketing content they put in front of their segment. P2 said, "Many marketers define segment by the boundary. What if the customer just outside at the edge of the boundary, then marketers contemplate should they bring those people into their segment? If they do, and soon the boundary will expand, affecting process integrity.

Therefore, P2 company SMM does not define segment by the boundary but by the center point. They call this idea the poster child concept. Their poster child is an ideal representation of their segment. In other words, the poster child is their persona of targeted customers. Then the company SBM channels all communication with appropriate marketing content to that poster child because it resonates with all people in

their segment. The accord of participants said that the marketing team focuses on facts rather than opinions when it comes to content. Participants cautioned about posting the content on social media sites. P1 said, "We are careful with our content nature. We do not want our ads besides breaking news about a mass shooting or any other inappropriate content.

Connecting Theme 1 to the Literature

Theme 1 is about content engineering. Participants stated informative and persuasive marketing content type to foster customer engagement in social medial. Moreover, the participant indicated that customers' journey constitutes many touchpoints, and for each touchpoint, the marketing content type needs to have emotional appeal for customer engagement. Kraus et al. (2019) stated appropriate styles of marketing content communication that are vibrant, entertaining, and trustworthy. Hahn et al. also (2016) noted emotional content could result in customer engagement leading to robust brand relationships. The participant stated posting informative and persuasive marketing content in the schedule and provide helpful links and giveaways to engage customers, so they become brand advocates and recommend products through eWOM. Shrestha et al. (2019) noted that social media users prefer helpful links to aid them with their buying decisions. Fernandes and Moreira (2019) recommended developing marketing content regularly and timely, including giveaways to engage customers. Participant identified segment through poster boy concept, which resonates with all targeted customers. Haikel-Elsabeh et al. (2019) supported developing marketing content that enables eWOM from customers, potentially reaching target audiences within the segment.

Connecting Theme 1 to the Conceptual Framework

The key construct of innovation is to harness creativity to foster desire outcomes (Cooper et al., 2016). In theme 1, participants discussed various marketing content types to improve customer engagement. The preposition in DOI was congruent with the adapting processes to foster innovative ideas and improve communication (Rogers & Kincaid, 1981). The DOI concept congruent Theme 1 because the SBM approach to marketing content identification and development requires an innovative approach for idea generation and communication across the team.

Theme 2: Platforms Selection and Implementation

Participants were fully in agreement that the social media design process starts with the business and customers' environment. According to P3, the design objective for customer engagement is to build customer preferences, retain customers, improve brand, and increase sales. All participants noted that digital marketing constitutes series of touchpoints encompassing activities in which consumers can engage. P2 added that touchpoints in the buying process show interest, explore the products, review products, make a purchase, and recommend products. The harmony of participant said that SBM design marketing contents that enable consumers to engage in activities at each touchpoint. P2 presented a content marketing editorial calendar, which revealed how the company marketer connects with the customers. The calendar constitutes timing for social posts, advertisements, and customer surveys.

P6 said, during marketing content design, we link outside articles to provide valuable information to customers. Curating and adding outside links in SMM content could build trust and reliability.

P5 company marketing people have a generalized additive model to determine what to post, the time, and the type of customers to address. Their customers respond based on the marketing content and type. In unison participants said they have transitioned from web 1.0, in which businesses use a set of static websites to reach customers.

P1 said, now the integration of web 2.0 is the second-generation platform we can collaborate, share, and interact with customers.

According to participants, web 2.0 uses social media platforms like Facebook, twitters, and YouTube. P4 posited that web 2.0 platforms could enable marketers to engage with customers.

All participants contended that they have a technology-enabled business model that foster network effects in various social media platform. Participants posited that their digital platform focuses on the community to build trust, and according to P6, trust results in connectivity, leading to engagement. The harmony of participants stated that they use Facebook fan pages to create an impression leading to engagement. According to P1, Facebook page design considerations include a thorough understanding of what they are hoping to achieve, target audience, and their uses of social media platforms and messaging. Participants were of like-mindedness as they said that the SBM pays attention to layout for visual appeal in designing Facebook fan pages. While advertising

on Facebook, marketers target audiences based on location, gender, habits, workplace, and education. All participants stated purchasing Page Post Ads on Facebook, which appear directly in users' new feed. The consensus of participants said they like the Facebook post because it has rich content attributes, whereas Twitter is limited. According to P5, Facebook includes real names and, therefore, more reliable than most social media sites. Moreover, P5 added that Facebook is suitable to measure engagement daily through Likes and Comments.

Besides Facebook, participants noted using Google +, Pinterest, Tweeters, YouTube, Reddit, and Instagram. P2 said they use Google + circles to segment their followers into groups, sharing relevant information with people within the group, barring others. P1 noted that the marketing content through Google + includes links and promotions besides photos of products. P1 cautioned marketers that while using paid advertising in Google + to pay attention to an aggregate of users who take advantage of Google service.

According to P1, Google describes active users across all their lines, including YouTube, so Google + social network includes far less reach. It is important in design considering.

P6 said that when developing Pinterest marketing strategies, the marketing people focus on their primary audience, which is females. Therefore, the brand personality they exhibit on Pinterest is eye-catching and constitutes unique pinboards. P5 stated that their Pinterest fans are loyal to the platform and suggested Pinterest advertisements for small businesses. All participating companies' leaders use Twitter to tweet special discounts,

fun news, and brand-building tweets. Participants were in harmony in conveying that they respond when customers have some nice things to say, and for negative tweets, they respond, seeking feedback and commitment to improving. Participants noted that social media revolves around two-way dialogues to build relationships and trust. P4 stated that their tweeter ads appear in users' timelines and include hashtags and links. P4 marketing people use promoted accounts and promoted trends to reach a broad audience to engage in conversation. Participants were united in stating that marketing leaders use Twitter to target existing and current followers, tailored audiences, and consumer interest.

P2, P4, and P6 stated the use of LinkedIn to receive customers' recommendations. According to participants, the marketing people review the LinkedIn profile and groups of like-minded people and reach out to them with professional dialogues to convey their message. Participants use sponsored Updates and LinkedIn Display ads to strengthen the professional social network. Participating company leaders reach to target audience classified by job title and function, industry, and geography.

According to P1, "Many business leaders create YouTube videos thinking it will go viral, which is less likely. However, in our case, we focus on creating useful how-to videos." P1 noted that compelling how-to videos could improve the rank in google search, so our marketing people pay attention to design and content in the videos. P3 and P5 use Redditt to share relevant information. However, P5 said, in the past tech-savvy community berated the company the content was high sales-focused. Therefore, P5 advised paying attention to marketing content while using Redditt. In accord participants said that through Instagram marketing, people could reach a large audience.

However, P2 said, Instagram has some drawback, one being the platform is based on a CPM advertising model, meaning advertisers charge for impressions their ad receives.

Therefore, small business owners who consider using Instagram to promote business should know the cost involved, said P2.

Participants unanimously stated the practical social media activities should combine new and old information to build a connection between individuals. According to P4, when design focuses on engagement perspective, then messaging shift from transactional to interactional in which the brand becomes part of customers' identity.

P4 Posited, "Marketing content design and engineering are not about focusing on big tools, systems, large scale algorithms development, it is about a small-scale decision, overcoming organizational issues and content reengineering.

Participants were in agreement that the core of marketing starts with selecting the social media sites and then designing marketing content tailored to the particular sites. According to P4 and P5, a marketing plan constitutes mapping out a path with specific goals. Participants said they integrate business intelligence tools to curate content and launch marketing campaigns. In concurrence participants stated using hangtags in social media. The participant presented a document that outlines best practices in using hashtags. The document revealed strategic A/B testing and using a tool like RiteTag, and Hashtag description and length. The documents also included numbers of hashtags to use in a given post. For example, for Facebook, 1-2 hashtags, Instagram could use up to 30

hashtags. According to the participants, the correct number of hashtags used in a given post could maximize reach and engagement.

When asked if the participating companies have their social media sites on their websites, Participants said engagement is all about customer interactions and reach with people who have access to the post.

P1 stated, Imagine Face decided to delete your page for whatever reasons, and then you have an online presence. Therefore, we do not put all eggs in one basket. We build our website which serves the purpose similar to other social media sites.

Connecting Theme 2 to the Literature

Participants recommended using the various platform for maximum engagement and reach. According to Kujur and Singh (2020), various social networking sites (SNS) enable firms to present their social media presence and engage potential customers to establish a friendly customer-brand relationship. Participants noted marketing content for social media varies, and therefore content design consideration is essential for each touchpoint. Participants recommended business intelligence tools for marketing content creation, design, and implementation. Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) supported the notion that content type, intensity, variety, and frequency differ among social media platforms and suggested appropriate content design and integration influence customer perceptions of brand equity and engagement. The participants said that hashtag is applicable in various social media platforms and recommended protocols for maximizing hashtag use from a design and implementation perspective. Shrestha et al. (2019) noted hashtag campaigns to spread innovation, create awareness, and generate high traffic in

social media. From a design perspective, participating company leaders focused on developing social media engagement opportunities through links, hashtags, platforms, and content materials. Gong (2018) supported the notion that engagement opportunities should connect the brand story with customers throughout the day.

Connecting Theme 2 to the Conceptual Framework

The tenets of DOI highlight the process to penetrate new technology, products, and services via innovative means and social influences (Cirus & Simonova, 2020). Theme 2 is platform selection and content implementation, which require SBM to remain creative to explore the best suitable social media platforms and design content to maximize the reach and engagement. The DOI concept is ideal for an innovative approach in social media platforms selection and designing appropriate marketing content about selected platforms. Such activities require creativity and communication, which are key constructs of DOI.

Theme 3: Leadership Engagement and Tools

Participants harmoniously stated that they measure the triumph and failure of social media techniques.

P2 said, we add tracking to social media activity to monitor them to understand what marketing content is resonating well with our targeted audiences.

P2 said consumers go through cross-channel engagement in their journey to purchase products. P2 added, that journey constitutes various touchpoints where consumers use mobile phones, laptops and talk to their friends to learn about the

products. It is all part of one journey, and marketing people have to look at this journey in totality and get people to work together to influence consumers at each touchpoint.

Participants were unanimous in expressing that the management team needs to recalibrate their mindset to ensure the functional design and implementation of social media activities.

P4 said, The leaders need to pay attention to what their people are doing, meaning researching how consumers are using social media as it pertains to business.

P4 added that leaders then decide what product to push at what times, learning about consumers' interests and observing their social media behaviors. P4 said that teams need to work in cross-functional mode to solve problems in a more integrated manner, for which leadership needs to set expectations.

Participants unanimously indicated that organizational impediment is fostering organizational level engagement by bringing people together. P1 said that the marketing department teams work in small-scale pilot projects constituting small geographic locations, specific customer segments, and narrow product lines. In this process, the marketing team learns how to improve things, understand challenges, and familiar with the process. with that kind of understanding, the P1 marketing team builds muscle to go into large-scale marketing.

In consensus participants stated reputation risk associated with a social media platform. Participants harmoniously supported that risk with social media platforms needs proper management, as dissatisfied customers could hamper company image and brands. P4 noted that staff at each organizational level needs to focus on serving

customers and their company leaders empower employees to make the right decisions to respond to dissatisfied customers. P1 presented the printout of some negative comments from customers and company leaders' responses. The document revealed addressing the customer by names, acknowledgment and apology, explanation, and opportunity to discuss the matter offline. P1 also presented a document relating to positive responses. However, the document revealed unlike the negative response to a negative review, leaders randomly selected the responses to a positive review.

When asked, P1 said, It is polite things to do as everyone is looking, and also it helps our SEO ranking. But to make it short and simple and we limit our responses to positive reviews.

P6 said that the SBM had developed customer advocacy sites to maintain a two-way conversation with customers. P6 company use company blogs and discussion boards people could use to share information.

P6 said, We design marketing content for blogs and discussion based on consumers' behaviors, attitudes, and expectations.

Then P6 marketing team channels content to empower customers. Therefore, P3 said their SBM is willing to experiment to learn about customers' device uses, information savviness, and self-efficacy when it comes to design. Based on data, we proceed with digital integration to sustain a relationship with customers. All participants said having data on historical behaviors of their consumers, familiar with customer's expectations, emotional motivations, and learned how their customers make contextual decisions.

According to all participants, the success of social media requires collaboration across the marketing team in managing different touchpoints with customers. P4 said, managing touchpoints requires technology and business intelligence tools to track customers' behaviors in real-time. P4 posited that the marketing staff at each level needs to have a thorough understanding of technological tools available to serve customers.

P3 said, The bottom line is making customers' shopping journey a pleasant experience because the customers can vote with their wallet.

Participants unanimously expressed that the marketing content for social media depends on customers' type. P1 participants categorized their customers into four types: *Pioneers, savvy, connivance, settled, and reserved.* The *pioneers* use multiple mobile devices and innovative technologies such as Near field communication (NFC) and Mobile Image Recognition (MIR) in their purchasing decisions. According to P1, these technologies enable customers to try a product before they make purchase decisions virtually. *Savvy* consumers, according to P1, exhibits app-supported shopping behaviors, whereas *connivance* consumers use their desktop or laptop computers as an alternative to traditional shopping behaviors. P1 noted that *settled* customers limit their use of technologies and often visit local retailers to purchase. Finally, according to P1, reserved use online platforms to search retailers and purchase through other channels.

P5 said that there are three stages of buying journey: *Awareness, consideration, decision* stages. According to P5, during the *awareness* stage, customers are experiencing problems and look for solutions. In the *consideration* stage, customers are looking for methods to resolve the issue. And in the *decision* stage, according to P5, customers make

their choice to solve the problem. P5 said that once the marketing team identifies the buyers' journey, they implement strategies to deliver a pleasant shopping experience.

P5 presented a guide the company leaders use for social media analytics. The *Sprout* trend reports that P5 presented detailed everything one needs to know about hashtags' effectiveness for engagement. The report showed the frequency in which company customers used hangtags, revealing the intensity of engagement. P5 stated data-driven targeting, such as targeting based on gender, age, and income. Participants with one accord mentioned contextual targeting. According to participants in contextual targeting, the marketing team examines the page customers' content and then adds supporting ads to gain their interest.

For example, P2 said, One can advertise vitamins or supplements on a fitness website.

P3 and P4 discussed channel to target and geolocation targeting. According to P4, in channel targeting, SBM provides ads to targeted channels, for example, health channels, travel channels, and so forth. P4 said geolocation targeting is reaching a consumer at a specific location.

In complete agreement participants stated targeting based on customers' behaviors. P6 said, "We identify actual browsing behaviors based on click made, product view, and site interaction through tracking cookies.

P6 noted that when customers visit our sites, we have disclosures about tracking cookies, so customers are aware.

P6 continued stating that tracking cookies help them understand the behavior of both identified and unidentified users. P1 said using predictive modeling based on behavioral data to predict future customers' behaviors. According to P1, predictive modeling is an intelligent way to connect with people. When asked to expand upon the predictive modeling P1, they use programmatic marketing platforms like *Acuity ads,* which help them identify online customers based on interest, devices use, and time of the day. P1 posited that *Acuity* uses real-time first- and third-party data to identify audience and campaign.

P1 added, Acuity ads are highly personalized based customers behaviors and interests that help us with intelligent connections, generate insights, and optimize performance.

The participates said they work through challenges conducting rapid cycle tests, and, in the process, they learn as they test things constantly. P2 noted that the right technology is the backbone in social media design to ensure that we can move data through various channels. The team ensures that we have the correct data, analyze data, design models, and manage content. All participants said that the data is essential as data helps them guide their decisions.

According to P6, We don't have product strategy; what we have is customer experience strategy. Therefore, we need data on our customers so that we could drive value.

The consensus of participants noted finding the right people to do the job. P2 noted that the company leaders hire a freelancer to generate content and post on their

social media site. When asked to expand upon hiring outside help, P2 said they use the

Fiver platform to identify Freelancers experts in content generation and marketing savvy.

The freelancer routinely updates content on the company's social media sites. P2 said the

company leaders provide the content, photos, videos, link to articles to the freelancer,

who then use the information they provide to update content 2 to 3 times a week on their

social media platform.

Participants stated using social media analytic to understand their social media

performance, which reflects customer engagement. P1 and P2 stated using *Snaplytics* for

brand analytics, publishing, and managing content in Snapchat. P1 and P3 marketing

teams use *Adobe Spark* to create graphics, animated videos, and wen stories for content

design. Participants in concord supported the notion that in social media, posting timing

is essential. P5 said that they use *YaLa* to post multiple social networks. According to P5,

"We need to know how our SMM content is doing, so we use *PostReach* to analyze the

contents from the moment it gets published.

P6 mentioned using *Quuu f*or hand-curated content suggestions.

According to P6, *Quuu* enables marketers to select from over many interest

categories for content suggestions.

P6 added, We also analyze our customers' experience using *Falcon.io*, which is a

social media and customer experience management platform.

Also, P6 stated using the Intellifluence platform, and we find the best influencers

to represent their company brand. However, P6 cautioned that social media engagement

does not require adding technologies but rather managing activities to utilize data to improve customer interactivity.

Connecting Theme 3 to the Literature

All participants supported leadership involvement to engage the customer for a better customer journey experience throughout all touchpoints. In this era of a globalized market, small business leaders need to deploy SMM strategies to exploit possible benefits and assess the social media tools and strategies most beneficial to remain sustainable (Bouranta et al., 2019). According to all participants, the success of social media requires collaboration across the marketing team in managing different touchpoints with customers. Social media engagement results from cooperation on projects and networking personally and professionally (Perčić & Perić, 2021). Business communication and collaboration among teams increase business performance (Sajid, 2016). Participants stated using social media analytic to understand their social media performance and related software to manage social media activities to improve customer engagement. Bouranta et al. (2019). suggested using social media analytics to formulate and measure social media success across various business functions. In agreement participants stated reputation risk associated with a social media platform. Moncey and Baskaran (2020) noted that a negative customer voice could affect a firm reputation and deter users from engaging and becoming brand advocates.

Connecting Theme 3 to Conceptual Framework

Theme 3 constituted leaders' engagement to mobilize teams to improve customers' journey in purchasing cycle. Theme 3 includes the use of business intelligence tools to

enhance customer reach and engagement. Rogers (2003) noted that a helpful concept for understanding DOI is adoption decisions. Therefore, DOI constructs support SBM's practices, such as adopting innovative technological tools and adopting a relationship management approach for team management, which could minimize reputation risk in social media and involve the team in delivering superior shopping experiences to customers. Roger's DOI concept could increase the understanding of why adoption of innovative SMM strategy is essential to improve consumers' engagement for business sustainability.

Applications to Professional Practice

Small business leaders started to recognize the benefits of social media. However, they encounter challenges to exploit opportunities effectively presented by social media (Fink et al., 2018). The challenges SBM experience includes designing the marketing content, using the social media platform, and utilizing business intelligence tools to maximize ROI in social media. Scholars recommended the adoption of social media engagement (Cawsey & Rowley, 2016). However, limited research has been done specifically on the interface between SMM and business-consumer or consumer-to-business relationship settings in social media.

The study findings could fill the gap in the literature through identified strategies to engage customers in social media. The study resulted in three themes: Content engineering, platform selection, and implementation, and leadership and tectological tools. The identified strategies have an application to business practices. Theme 1 consists of content engineering focusing on content types, which are informative and

persuasive. Consumer engagement is the psychological state of consumers, and through informative and persuasive content, SBM could provide a feeling of being an essential part of the firm (Moreno-Munoz et al., 2016).

Moreover, informative and persuasive content could result in customers advocating company brand, image, and product through WOM. Positive WOM increased brand trust, brand commitment, and quality of consumer-brand-relationship (Akrout & Nagy, 2018). In theme 1, participants noted that multichannel communication uses persuasive and information marketing content throughout various customer journeys. Gill et al. (2017) stated providing the correct information for each type of touchpoint giving customers an enjoyable positive experience along their customer journey. Content engineering affects consumers' behaviors leading to motivation to engage and attach to the brand (Abusamhadana et al., 2019).

In theme 2, participants discussed various social media platforms and their usefulness. The benefits of social media platform are that it enables SBM to reach audiences internationally with less effort, time, and money (Basri, 2016). Participants suggested using Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Google +, and Pinterest. The increasing use of social networking sites (SNS) has led to firms creating their social media presence and pursuing the engagement of potential customers to establish a friendly customer-brand relationship (Kujur & Singh, 2020). Social media platforms enable consumers engagement by giving them a voice via clicks of like, dislike or comments. The marketing content on social media platforms should provide consumers with a memorable shopping experience. The participant supported using links and

hashtags. Customers clicking on advertisement links and hashtags increase awareness and traffic to the sites (Fang et al., 2015).

In theme 2, participants supported routinely updating the marketing content with giveaways and deals. The benefits to business by giving away prizes, tags in a timely schedule include employee engagement and attraction to the brand (Fernandes & Moreira, 2019). In theme 2, the participant noted adopting marketing content suitable to the platform. Effective marketing content with good communication in social media platforms ensures awareness in customers leading to high traffic (Kraus et al., 2019). In theme 1, the participant noted engineering content tailored to the "poster child" concept. In Theme 2, Participants recommended selecting a platform that matches their target audience. Developing targeted marketing content and the use of suitable social media platforms to develop accessibility and connectivity with customers could influence consumer perceptions of brand equity (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Taking advantage of existing social media platforms could increase revenue and help to remain competitive (Felix et al., 2017).

Theme 3 is about the leader's roles in social media activities and business intelligence software to maximize reach and customer engagement. The use of technology in SMM could increase a firm's competitive advantage (Nawafleh, 2015). Technological tools help business leaders understand their customers (Parsons & Lepkowska-White, 2018) and generate high traffic on social media sites (Shrestha et al., 2019). Moreover, SBM could use analytic tools to reduce marketing costs. In theme 3, participants noted managing risk in social media to safeguard company image. A

negative customer voice could affect a firm's reputation (Moncey & Baskaran, 2020). Leaders play a significant role in bringing the team together, improving buyers' journeys and decision-making capabilities as the team engages in two-way communication with customers on social media. Leaders' role in SMM content generation, risk management, and post-sales service improves customer satisfaction, leading to more engagement and brand loyalty.

Implications for Social Change

The study findings constitute marketing strategies for small business leaders to improve consumer engagement. The marketing strategies include content engineering, utilizing social media platforms, and the leader's involvement and technological tools. The favorable implication of effective marketing strategies includes SMM able to reach consumers and engage with appropriate content, resulting in sales. Successful businesses are likely to grow by providing employment opportunities to people in the local communities. Shibia and Barako (2017) stated new job creations could eliminate poverty and improve living standards.

Small businesses consist of 99.7% of organizations with paid employees and 40.8% of private-sector payroll (SBA, 2018a). Business growth and employment result in tax revenues for local government. The local government could improve local schools, senior housings, and parks and recreation facilities benefiting people. Moreover, successful business is likely to fulfill corporate social responsibilities by philharmonic contribution to charities of choice such as cancer research and environmental protection.

Recommendations for Action

In 2015, small businesses in the U.S. have employed 58.9 million people, created 1.9 million net jobs, and represented 47.5% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018a). In that same year, Maryland small businesses employed 1.1 million people, representing 50.2% of the private workforce (SBA, 2018b). Based on this record, small businesses are a significant contributor to the U.S economy, and its success is imperative for the country's GDP.

The strategies that participants identified have positive ramifications, which is improving marketing, leading to consumer engagement. Discussing all social media-related marketing activities is beyond the scope of this research. However, the strategies identified in this study have universal applicability. Therefore, business leaders of all industry types could use the identified strategies to reach customers, engage them, and assist in their buying decisions. The identified strategies enable consumers to experience a pleasant journey in the buying process, improving company image, brand loyalty, and reaching a wider audience.

Besides business leaders, academic scholars, consultants, and government officials could find the study finding helpful. Consider the larger scope of SMM strategies, and academic scholars could conduct additional research to fill the gap in the literature. Consultants could additional insights on SMM strategies enabling them to serve their customers better. Finally, government officials could improve policies when they have a better understanding of the social media landscape. Therefore, to reach a

wider audience, I plan to disseminate the findings through ProQuest publications, journal articles, seminars, and conferences.

Recommendations for Further Research

Several limitations were anticipated before collecting data. The limitations were the effectiveness of open-ended questions, unable to probe with follow-up questions and transferability of study findings. The open-ended questions resulted in a conversational-type dialogue with full cooperation from the participants. Participants were immersed in discussions and welcomed probing questions, which resulted in data saturation. I conducted the study in multiple case study settings, which enable me to understand the phenomenon from a broader lens. However, considering the scope of SMM, future researchers could conduct further studies by blending both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain rich data and improve study credibility. Moreover, a phenomenological design could enable a researcher to increase the sample size to get a broader perspective on the phenomenon and generalize findings to a larger audience.

Reflections

The doctoral study was challenging and yet rewarding. Throughout the journey, I learned few life lessons. One lesson is that when in a mission to accomplish something significant, one must have discipline. In my case, the discipline included time management and following routines. From a professional perspective, the study finding expanded personal knowledge in SMM and improved my writings and analytical skills. Considering the time and volume of work involved, I find choosing the research topic of interest is essential to avoid boredom.

In some instances, I found the doctoral process overwhelming, and I found difficulties in motivating myself. However, my eyes are always on the grand prize, obtaining a terminal degree and belonging to an elite group of academic scholars. Focusing on the result and my discipline kept me moving.

Conclusion

The study includes interviewing six participants grounded with DOI. The study resulted in three themes. This study's findings add to the knowledge of small businesses' processes to develop and implement SMM. The increased understanding could also equip SBMs and owners with strategies for implementing SMM and maintaining an increasingly effective online presence. Theme 1 is about content engineering. Participants stated informative and persuasive content type to foster customer engagement in products via SMM. Participants stated they use messages with philanthropic content that may induce empathy as a persuasion as it appeals to the emotions of consumers to adopt a product via the social media platforms used for advertising. The participates also stated the use of informative and persuasive content such as messages via logos which carry unusual information that may influence consumers to engage in a product or creating awareness for consumers to adopt the product as a form of appealing for logic. Researchers frequently categorize content that attempt to persuade and promote relationship building in this manner as persuasive content. Moreover, the participant indicated that customers' journey constitutes many touchpoints, and for each touchpoint, the contents type needs to have emotional appeal for customer engagement. Theme 2 highlighted on the various platforms and content implementation strategies for maximum

engagement and reach. Theme 3 is about leadership involvement and using technological tools to engage the customer for a better customer journey experience throughout all touchpoints. The failure rate is high for small businesses within the first 5 years of operation (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Identified SMM strategies could help business leaders to increase brand recognition, customer retention, and engagement and prevent businesses from failing.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How does your organization use social media as a communication channel to engage customers?

2. What effective SMM strategies have your organization developed and implemented to engage customers?

3. How does your organization develop its SMM strategies?

4. How did your organization implement SMM strategies to engage customers?

5. What, if any, adjustments over time have your organization made to its SMM strategies that have improved consumers' engagement?

6. How does the management of your organization determine benchmarks of the effectiveness of a specific SMM strategy after its development and implementation?

7. Based on your experiences, what positive effects have the implementation of SMM strategies had on your organization over time?

8. What else would you like to share regarding your experiences in developing and using SMM implementation strategy to engage consumers?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Participants Identification:

Participant No. Identifier:_____

Age_____

Gender_____

Occupation_____

Religion_____

Years of experience working with SMM strategies_____

The central research question: The central research question is "What strategies do small business managers use to develop and effectively implement SMM to improve consumers engagement?" The interview will contain 8 open-ended questions to obtain an in-depth information from experienced small business managers in Maryland.

Explanation of the research study: The researcher will go over the purpose of the study, obtain consent from the participant, and provide a consent form to each participant.

Selecting of interview time and location: Interviews was conducted at an agreed upon time and location between the participant and researcher.

Recording the interview and note-taking: The interviews was recorded and notes-taken during each interview. A day after the interview, a thank-you card was mailed to each participant.

Transcription of interview: The researcher will transcribe the recorded interview of each participant and send the transcribes to participants via email.

Member checking: The participants will receive and review the copy of the researcher transcription and interpretation of their interview. The participants will send their confirmation of accuracy of the transcription or updated copy in case of any to clarification to researcher by e-mail or telephone to confirm accuracy of the transcription.

Follow-up questions: The researcher will arrange a 30 minutes session with each participant to ask any follow-up questions to determinant the quality of the responses.