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Social Media Marketing Strategies to Increase Revenue in the Health and Fitness Industry

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Health and fitness business owners are challenged with using effective social media marketing strategies to grab the attention of their target audience and engage them versus viable competitors. Small business owners in the health and fitness industry are concerned about leveraging social media strategies to improve business goal achievement. Grounded in the social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners use for effective social media marketing to increase customer engagement. Participants were three small business owners of health and fitness businesses within Saint Charles County, Missouri who used social media strategies to communicate and engage with potentially new and ongoing clients. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and a review of the company's marketing platforms, data analytics tools, and media postings. Through thematic analysis, three themes were identified: barriers, engagement, and key performance indicator impact on business. A key recommendation is for small business owners to craft audience-engaging content by establishing real-time connection and communication using two-way conversations. The implications for positive social change include the potential to amplify community advocacy and engagement for healthier communities.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this body of research to all the leaders, business owners, and social media professionals who inspired me to explore strategies that may help organizations amplify, connect, and engage their audience through social media marketing.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my Doctoral Research Chair, Dr. Jill Murray and SCM Reviewer, Dr. Denise Land for their unwavering support, insightful feedback, and invaluable mentorship throughout this process. Their expertise and dedication have been instrumental in shaping my research and guiding me to its completion.

To my family and friends, your constant encouragement, patience, and love have been my anchor throughout this journey. I especially want to thank my amazing wife, Sheila, for her unending support and belief in my abilities while demonstrating understanding, patience, and for always being there.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to my students whose inspiration continues to guide me and to Dr. Rachael McCalmon, Walden 2023 Alumni, for her camaraderie, collaboration, and the stimulating discussions that have sparked new ideas and perspectives.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Background of the Problem

The issue small business owners in the health and fitness industry need to address is how to leverage strategies of using social media to support their overall business goals. One of the challenges for leveraging strategic opportunities using social media marketing (SMM) is there is no clear definition or comprehensive framework that is available to guide integration of social media strategies and tactics for effective communication and engagement (F. Li et al., 2021). Social media and SMM for small businesses can be implemented as an effective and efficient way to optimize marketing efforts (Popescu & Tulbure, 2022). These scholars argued that adding guidance involving SMM is paramount to cultivating relations with clients, increasing customer engagement, and improving overall marketing performance.

SMM strategies can increase customer trust in businesses, which improves brand awareness, engagement, and sales (Althuwaini, 2022). Katrodia (2022) suggested SMM empowers customers in ways that traditional marketing never has done. With over 60 billion posts made every 24 hours, getting noticed or grabbing attention is at a premium as marketers are competing against crowded news feeds (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021). In this study, I explored SMM strategies that small business owners use to increase sales within the health and fitness industry.

Problem Statement

Online marketing functions are essential for small businesses to reach their target audiences, as people are engaging as much as 70% of their time on online platforms using

multiple social media channels (Torres et al., 2021). Omolloh and Lao (2020) found 50% of small businesses in the United States use SMM to connect and engage with their audience. The general business problem was that small business owners struggle to adopt strategies for social media advertising as opposed to social media engagement. The specific business problem was that some small business owners of health and fitness facilities lack strategies to implement SMM to increase customer engagement effectively.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement. The target population was three small business owners who effectively used SMM strategies for three health and fitness facilities within Saint Charles County, Missouri. Implications for positive social change through social media for small businesses is in advocacy, creating awareness, fundraising campaigns, community engagement, promotion and marketing, and collaborations and partnerships (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021).

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research involves ongoing exploration and accounting of the context of a phenomenon to gain an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings and social constructs (Diaz et al., 2022). A researcher applying qualitative research collects data from participants about lived experiences while incorporating face-to-face interviews using predetermined and open-ended questions (Yin, 2017). The qualitative research method was appropriate for this study as I sought to obtain a deeper awareness of effective SMM strategies in the health and fitness industry. Malterud (2022) posited

qualitative studies can capture insightful, reliable, and accurate data. Quantitative research involves testing hypotheses and examining relationships among variables or comparison of group means (Walczyk & Cockrell, 2022).

There were three possible research designs for this qualitative study: (a) case study, (b) ethnography, and (c) phenomenology. Guha et al. (2018) posited semi-structured face-to-face interviews and document reviews are some of the most effective strategies for collecting data from small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owner-managers. I selected a multiple case study design for this qualitative case study to elucidate unique perspectives regarding a phenomenon in its real-world environment with successful small business owners. Multiple case study designs are ideal for developing in-depth insights (Yin, 2017). With the phenomenological design, the primary research focal point is participants' perceptions of personal meanings in shared experiences found within a social context (Amatullah et al., 2020).

I did not use the quantitative methodology because I did not test hypotheses or theories about variables' relationships or group differences. The mixed methods approach was not appropriate for this study, as I did not conduct statistical data analysis. For research design I did not employ either ethnographic or phenomenological methods because the focus of the research was not to explore personal meanings of participants' experiences. After considering my options, I applied a qualitative research methodology for this study.

Research Question

What strategies do small business owners of health and fitness facilities use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement?

Interview Questions

1. What strategies are you using to engage customers via SMM?
2. What social media channels are you using to increase sales via SMM?
3. What if any strategies are you using to post auto-scheduled content and real-time SMM content?
4. In what ways do you measure the effectiveness of your SMM strategies?
5. What SMM strategies did not add value as planned?
6. What additional comments would you like to add regarding effective use of your SMM strategies?

Conceptual Framework

The social exchange theory by George Casper Homans served as the conceptual framework to guide my study. Social exchange between at least two parties is an exchange of activity whether it is tangible or intangible (Homans, 1961). Webb and Roberts (2016) suggested the social exchange theory can foster understanding regarding the effectiveness of external communication. Ham et al. (2019) indicated the social exchange theory leads to insights regarding how small business owners are effectively using, updating, and monitoring social media channels.

Valkenburg (2022) contended effective SMM strategies provide seamless brand experiences for prospective clients with the ability to increase relationship quality rather

than solely drive sales or improve brand awareness. Gholston et al. (2016) concluded small businesses need to focus on creating relationships, increasing brand exposure, and relationship building rather than solely concentrating on sales, and how specific social media content could lead to interactions which engage customers. Other researchers, including Brown et al. (2019) and Mohan et al. (2021), posited the notion of gaining mutual trust between business and customer.

The social exchange theory originated from the United States. This theory is used to address how real-time two-way communication can build relationships with the organization's target markets by using effective SMM strategies, which are essential for small business owners (Webb & Roberts, 2016). Small business owners who participate in effective SMM strategies create multiple connection opportunities in terms of one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one, and many-to-many networks, resulting in increased sales, real-time consumer feedback, and branding (Rosário & Raimundo, 2021).

Pillars and quantitative markers of the social exchange theory include equity and the perception of fairness, reciprocity, and trust in social engagement. Interpersonal social exchange is a cost-reward calculation made by individuals as derived from a rational mode of exchange (Chia et al., 2021). These scholars continued, stating in social media climates, individuals are more likely to join social communities due to intrinsic rather than extrinsic benefits. Leaders and digital marketers of advocacy initiatives must consider intrinsic joy and gratification individuals derive from helping others using social media channels.

Operational Definitions

The following are terms associated with SMM and strategy that appear in the study:

Customer relationship management (CRM): A shift in blending social media data with traditional CRM systems by integrating social media tools with CRM processes to increase sales, custom communications regarding products, services, and programs, and offer real-time CRM (Guha et al., 2018).

Purchase intention: Consumer plan to purchase a specific brand or the intent of deciding in which consumers act favorably toward a brand (Hapsari et al., 2021).

Social media marketing (SMM): Digital marketing via social media channels, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and live streaming platforms such as Facebook Live and Instagram Live (Lupo & Stroman, 2020).

Social proof: Incentives for customers who post their purchases or share their testimonials on social media channels as an example of documented evidence (Mainardes & Cardoso, 2019).

Traditional media: Traditional media includes printed, hard copy means of communication, including books, magazines, and newspapers (Dan, 2021).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Durkin et al. (2020) contended a frequent assumption in academic research is there must be one correct answer that has to be discovered. I was intentional in terms of avoiding the notion that one right answer was the prevailing correct one. In this study, I

assumed participants provided correct and accurate information during interviews to explore SMM strategies they employed to increase sales. I also assumed interview questions aligned with the study's purpose and facilitated appropriate and thought-provoking responses from participants. In addition, I assumed participants had sufficient knowledge to answer interview questions and were honest and thorough in their responses.

Limitations

Limitations impact the researcher's ability to draw certain generalizations, conclusions, and implications from studies (Yin, 2017). One of the limitations of this study was participants' limited SMM strategies. Another limitation was the absence of quantitative datasets for mean comparisons or correlations in order to establish verifiable outcomes from social media data analytics. Results of the proposed study were limited in terms of honesty and thoroughness of participants' responses. Since this study is specific to health and fitness facilities within Saint Charles County, Missouri, generalizations may not be suitable in other counties or states.

Delimitations

Delimitations are factors within the researcher's control that reduce or limit the study's range or boundaries (Coker, 2022). I selected participants from a sample of small business owners of health and fitness facilities within Saint Charles County, Missouri. Participants effectively used SMM strategies to increase sales of health and fitness facilities.

Significance of the Study

Study findings may yield potential insights for marketers by identifying shifts in strategies from traditional to SMM, which includes dynamics of real-time two-way communication (Webb & Roberts, 2016). This awareness of shifts in SMM strategies may lead to perspectives where organization leaders can use social media capabilities and best practices as a viable tool to increase presence and performance. Findings and recommendations may lead to new strategies to assist small businesses with their SMM efforts to increase sales and customer retention.

Contributions to Business Practice

Study findings could contribute awareness about how small business owners of health and fitness facilities who participated in the study successfully used SMM strategies to increase customer engagement. Atanassova and Clark (2015) found SME marketers can develop, alter, and expand their marketing by acquiring business intelligence in the market through social media use. SME marketers can leverage their SMM efforts for the strategic purpose of gaining business intelligence. A specific benefit for small business owners of health and fitness businesses was real-time access to data analytics in order to use applicable information to drive decisions for increasing effectiveness of SMM strategies, leading to business goal attainment.

Implications for Social Change

Some of the possibilities for social change could occur providing business leaders are willing to adopt to this ever-changing environment of using effective SMM. A few examples of social change through social media for small businesses is in advocacy,

creating awareness, fundraising campaigns, community engagement, promotion and marketing, and collaborations and partnerships (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021). Leveraging social media strategies and tactics could allow local small businesses to not only effectively engage with their communities, but also build strong relationships with customers worldwide while building brand awareness. Additionally, digital and social media marketing could be a great vehicle to advocate for causes important to the individual communities thereby fostering positive social change.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement. The literature review involved peer-reviewed scholarly articles and seminal works to support and address the research question. The literature review included critical insights regarding existing and effective SMM strategies in small health and fitness businesses. Sebele-Mpofu (2020) contended an extensive literature review is a valued method to procure data for research.

I conducted a thorough review of previous studies on SMM strategies, which offered a firm foundation for understanding the nature of SMM effectiveness. I also examined literature on small health and fitness businesses' SMM strategies, along with appropriate strategies from scholarly sources, including peer-reviewed articles, scholarly journals, and academic books. The literature review process provided the researcher with the opportunity to decisively read, draw out, and synthesize text from all relevant sources

in addition to reviewing articles that inform the conceptual framework shaping the study (Alsalami, 2022).

I used the following databases: Emerald Insight, ABI/Inform Complete, ProQuest, Business Source Complete, and EBSCOHost. I used the following keywords to search databases for sources: *brand content popularity, brand loyalty, social customer relationship management, social exchange theory, social media engagement, social media marketing*, and *small business marketing*. Of the sources that were referenced in this document, 115 had publication dates between 2019 and 2024; 74.19% of sources were published within the past 5 years. Of the 105 peer-reviewed articles that were used in this literature review, 75.00% were published between these dates.

Organization of the Review

The literature review discussion begins with a review of small business marketing followed by an analysis of the social exchange theory, which is the conceptual framework for this study. The social exchange theory was used to provide insights regarding how small businesses optimize their strategic planning, social listening, and monitoring in real-time social media channels. The shift from small business marketing to SMM by small businesses was reviewed for a brief appraisal of digital media.

I provided an overview of opportunities using social media and entrepreneurship which led to reviewing SMM strategies. I addressed successful marketing and incorporation of social media data analytics as well as a brief appraisal of customer retention. I also reviewed common themes regarding social media in the health and fitness industry, which was the cornerstone of this study. To address sensationalizing

social media as a strategy, I reviewed potential concerns and dangers by discussing negative aspects of SMM. I provided the reader with information on the future of social media in terms of marketing trends, tools, and newer technology within this landscape.

Small Business Marketing

Small business owners and entrepreneurs often experience challenges involving limited resources, budgets, and time, impacting their ability to build a new or revamp existing brands. Through necessity, SMEs use different marketing strategies as compared to larger enterprises related to accessing organizational resources (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Franco, 2018). The key for SME business owners is to understand that despite budget and resource differences among large companies, deciding upon a competitive advantage to communicate through marketing is the starting point. Consumers must perceive a competitive edge, and any subsequent loss or disruption to a single customer could potentially impact sustainability and viability (Franco, 2018). The value of understanding nuances and different marketing needs of small businesses should alter strategic planning and best practices used by marketers compared to their larger counterparts.

The top-down organizational approach which incorporates the 5 Ps of marketing (price, place, product, promotion, and public relations) is known by marketers as traditional marketing (Kotler et al., 2022). Using the classic traditional marketing approach, firm executives conduct necessary research to craft marketing plans and formulate strategies to promote the company's products and services in order to leverage any competitive advantage. The traditional model is a consumer-driven approach.

Franco (2018) argued the bottom-up marketing approach's strength is focusing on employee networking and leveraging relationship-building marketing strategies within strategic plans. This approach facilitates a culture of identifying customers' specific needs as employees are in direct contact. The strength of this specific strategy is that SME business owners can create their marketing plans based on their personnel and implement innovative ideas quickly based on the needs of consumers.

There appears to be a gap in literature regarding specific marketing practices. As marketing technology continues to evolve, literature lags in terms of how SMM impacts strategic marketing plans. Further research is needed to examine and explore whether SME marketing approaches and methods differ from larger enterprises.

Social Exchange Theory

The social exchange theory was the foundation for this study. The theory is used to address business leader strategies regarding effectiveness of small business external communications (Webb & Roberts, 2016). Effectively building a brand involves the consistent creation of high-quality content that persuades users of the brand's dominance (Krishen et al., 2019).

The theory also involves unique perspectives in terms of how small companies use strategic planning, social listening, and monitoring via real-time social media channels (Achen, 2017). The theory helps marketers in strategic planning to reach people quickly in real-time through the use of sharing content across social media channels thereby increasing impressions and engagement. Ham et al. (2019) found social

conversation was the highest driver impacting formation of positive attitudes toward sharing.

Snow (2020) argued marketers should develop further strategies to improve personal brand identity through action and not just by words. Human-to-human interaction plays a vital role that potentially enhances users' outcome expectations and information exchange. An emerging theme is the need to encourage small business owners to use human-to-human interactions in an authentic manner. Marketers should continue implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and expanding their marketing strategies to include messaging on social media channels. Aji et al. (2020) argued a more interactive SMM strategy can directly impact brand equity by electronic word of mouth (eWOM) influencing other consumers to share their thoughts on the brand.

Another framework is the uses and gratification theory which involves examining distinct sharing motivations of consumers using social media platforms. This framework differs from the social exchange theory as it is perceived to have limitations in terms of ignoring social cognitive aspects of consuming media. The promise theory involves communications and promises of businesses as they pertain to expectations of consumers (Grönroos, 2017). Small businesses must consider promises and guarantees they make to consumers especially related to performance expectations.

SMM by Small Businesses

Advertising has played a pivotal role in American society. Companies embrace the notion that branding builds awareness, sales, and consumer loyalty are crucial, but

rich SMM content that marketing teams can generate quickly may attract more clients Cluley et al. (2020). They also acknowledged companies' spending on digital and social media platforms has now exceeded advertising expenditures on television for the first time in United States history therefore disrupting traditional advertising models. However, the emergence of digital marketing, social media, and data analytics has disrupted traditional advertising models (Bates et al., 2019).

This recent shift may encourage small businesses to be more relevant, competitive, and effective with their marketing strategies. Chitra and Kalaiselvi (2021) identified strategy, planning, publishing, listening, engagement, analytics, and advertising as the cornerstone for 2-way engagement across social media platforms. Effectively using social media involves creating relationships, increasing brand exposure, and being intentional about creating personal impressions through relationship building as Vieira and Ferreira (2020) argued the need for small fitness centers to evaluate their underperforming strategies and tactics.

Rohde and Mau (2021) contended that using numbers, texts, emoticons, pictures, videos, and electronic surveys are preferred by consumers to express and share their opinions about products and services they purchase. Most marketers are aware of challenges by combining consumer perceptions with qualitative comments and quantitative scores via algorithms that are used for marketing research. As most businesses use various social media channels in their marketing, these organizations can develop online communities that foster an atmosphere or culture of user engagement and real-time connection. X. Li and Wu (2018) concluded empirical evidence that online

electronic (eWOM) due to implementing social media tactics can improve product sales and lead to positive interactions when integrated with additional marketing strategies. One of the most common methods for enhancing social media eWOM is strategically complimenting online reviews of past sales from consumers to promote future purchases.

Social Media and Entrepreneurship

Olanrewaju et al. (2020) argued social media implementation by entrepreneurs had transformed marketing in terms of business networking, search engine optimization, and crowdfunding. Social CRM capabilities allow marketers to accentuate customer-relationship building through social media channels, which supports further customer engagement and interactions between parties. Social CRM is used to leverage collaborative efforts between customers and businesses so both parties are mutually satisfied (H. G. Kim & Wang, 2019). The future of social media in marketing includes CRM due to the fact this tool is a strong predictor of company performance.

Rajamma et al. (2020) argued about 20% of respondents misclassified the type of user-generated content (UGC), which led to negative purchase intentions. This critical mistake could negatively impact brands if video creators and marketers seek to improve the value of UGCs. Product ambassadors also demonstrated their influence as a viable resource through UGC via pathways for bidirectional communication and information exchange. Brand ambassadors impact the future of SMM by creating UGC to help other consumers through demonstrations, how-to instructions, and user experiences.

SMM Strategy

Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) reported that SMM has emerged as a useful option for small businesses to incorporate as part of their strategy to monitor performance and use data analytics to drive decisions. Social media offers small businesses a low-cost monitoring solution, and some services such as Hootsuite, Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, and Instagram Analytics are available at no cost. Shay and Van Der Horst (2019) argued the importance of seeing comments on SMM posts offers companies greater value than merely receiving likes. Danhoff and Krebs (2021) reported strategic communications using Twitter limits variety in the message content due to having a limit on characters but found that using visuals such as videos and pictures drives consumer engagement.

Companies should focus on strategic planning and implementation to ensure their building a strategic reputation leveraging SMM and aligning their social media platforms to reach and engage their target markets (Davidaviciene et al., 2019; Puangmaha et al., 2020; Sefidanoski et al., 2021). Poddar and Agarwal (2019) contended SMM is one of the best strategies to build a company's brand. Data shows there are more than 5.07 billion, or 62.6% of the world’s population, were active users of social media networks. M.-Y. Kim et al. (2019) examined how SMM offers global brand management the opportunity to gain a better understanding of consumer's acceptance of and attitudes toward a brand by exploring customer feedback and social media communications to gauge where in the world a brand is popular. Bates et al. (2019) identified that using real-time live-streaming options through tools such as TikTok Live, Facebook Live,

Instagram Live, and YouTube Live has emerged as another communication avenue for companies to promote their brands as well as engage with their followers on social media channels.

In the world of social media, people who consumers' trust are known as user influencers. Yerasani et al. (2019) supported consumers are more likely to trust people they know or acquaintances with a favorable product recommendation through a company's SMM channels. They concluded that acquiring user influencers through effective SMM builds relationships and trust in other people and companies to increase sales and brand awareness.

Another example of user influence is when companies practice CSR in their social media communication. Using this practice builds trust in relationships and communication with stakeholders while allowing real-time feedback concerning existing CSR practices (Kucukusta et al., 2019). Social media influencers can enhance a brand's name and image by driving engagement as a brand ambassador (Joshi et al., 2023).

After analyzing SMM strategy, the emergence of social media influencers has created in innovative role in strategic marketing through brand-related information as a brand ambassador. Small businesses should prioritize monitoring performance through key performance indicators as well as leveraging data analytics to drive future marketing decisions. A key strategy to consider is crafting social media content intended to engage a specific target audience which enables a two-way real-time communication. Finally, social media marketers need to recognize content strategy must be directly related to the social media channels their audience is engaging in.

Successful Marketing

Successful marketing is a top priority for small business owners to ensure that strategic company goals are met or exceeded. Using SMM is dependent upon the achievement of key performance indicators (KPIs) and other metrics while integrating social media platforms with consumers. Lou and Koh (2017) argued that brands, relationships, and quality (BRQ) are cornerstones to support dynamic relationships between consumers and brands. BRQ is a tool marketers use to provide a quantitative and valid instrument to measure these relationships' strength.

Managerial implication of this data allows social media marketers to focus on evaluating their consumer-brand relationships' effectiveness. Dwivedi et al. (2022) posited the noted that incorporating advanced technology offers marketers a superior way to understand their target market, track purchase intentions, and gain insights into the purchasing journey to better know the audience as well as create digital content that will entice consumers. Lou and Koh (2017) confirmed this measurement examines the person-brand relationship to determine direction variances in strength of the relationship instead of using social media channel metrics.

Companies using social proof through consumer testimonials can demonstrate high standards through word-of-mouth advertising as a strategic planning method. Mainardes and Cardoso (2019) concluded social media's influence on consumer purchase intention is a foundational pillar of an effective marketing strategy, which has shown to build trust and loyalty within the store consumer. Some retailers offer incentives for those customers who post their purchases on the company's social media channels as evidence

of social proof. Schaefer (2019) argued two-thirds of marketing efforts are happening without the organization having control, however, word-of-mouth or social proof by trusted influencers who make recommendations post-sale are driving new sales.

An emerging approach is the phenomenon of improvised marketing interventions (IMIs) such as implementing social media actions in real-time pertaining to an external event that allows the company a direct connection to their brand message for the highest degree of impact (Borah et al., 2020). This IMI tactic fosters an online atmosphere where consumers can see branded content generated on social media channels. It provides an opportunity for consumers to share their feelings and perceptions about the event and brand in real-time.

Social Media Data Analytics

Social Media Analytics (SMA) is considered a strategic viable data source within the field of analytics (Heavey et al., 2020). Business leaders are continuing to explore social media to gain a competitive advantage. Marketers can use SMA to extract business intelligence from social media platforms and by examining the different sources of data generated by consumers, employees, and companies to measure brand personality (W. He, W. Zhang, et al., 2019). Using SMA data points would allow marketers the opportunity to quantitatively analyze a consumer identity-brand personality link from real-world evidence stored on platform analytics.

Marketers and small business owners are challenged to procure benefits from social commerce marketing by understanding the four specific steps of data discovery, collection, preparation, and analysis integrated into SMA (Stieglitz et al., 2018).

Understanding the four-step process is paramount as SMA can be divided into many types of data subsets based on company's strategic goals and objectives. Chitra and Kalaiselvi (2021) identified strategy, planning, publishing, listening, engagement, analytics, and advertising are the key foundation for building consumer engagement across various social media platforms. It is a challenge for marketers to understand different types of SMA and how to incorporate data into their SMM strategies that align with their companies' goals.

Small business owners and marketers are challenged with long-term business viability in the marketplace and must rely upon data to drive strategic planning decisions to keep their business sustainable (Malott, 2016; Taneja et al., 2016). Mobile technology and social commerce are projected to accelerate economic value based on advances in operational efficiency and generating more consumer touch points to improve sales. By using SMA data, marketers are able to adapt their strategies to connect with a growing network of consumers and focus their efforts on grabbing their attention to drive customer engagement. Kovacova et al. (2022) contended that marketers have the technological scalability to influence consumer behavior to new and exciting heights for SMM engagement.

Marketers can drive customer engagement by improving their customer loyalty programs through social media and measuring SMA data results in real-time (W. He, W. Zhang, et al., 2019). The strategy behind using loyalty programs through social media is to drive customer engagement by offering free merchandise, rewards, coupons, and offering advance notification of new products, services, and programs. Beyond

improving loyalty programs, small businesses can leverage their external open data through SMA by evaluating and assessing their customers' online opinions related to service quality (He et al., 2018). Incorporating this SMA tool marketers can gain new insights and understanding of customer's perception of service quality in real-time instead of waiting for data generated from the traditional survey-method approach.

Marketers understand public relations play a significant role in the optics of a company, their brand, and position on topics that consumers feel are important (e.g., CSR, advocacy, and community engagement). Tam and Kim (2019) confirmed SMA tools are a practical strategy for developing real-time data points while providing rapid analysis and assisting in understanding the nuances of social media platforms. However, some consumers consider these new tools concerning. The marketer needs to realize SMA tools cannot capture all the different opinions for all the people and must discern what is meaningful to the organization (He et al., 2018).

Public relations professionals must interpret data and draw conclusions to give strategic guidance to key decision-makers. Stakeholders must be aware of advantages and disadvantages of using SMA tools (Tam & Kim, 2019). Building trust, enhancing customer service, offering a loyalty program, and providing interaction can greater foster long-term customer retention. Emaluta and Soewarno (2019) concluded that customer relationship management (CRM) possesses a favorable correlation with customer retention.

He et al. (2016) contended an increased number of consumers seek social media sites to communicate in real-time their opinions, feelings, and concerns about company's

products, services, or experiences. Marketers know SMA data can provide companies with customer purchasing intention behavior and shopping experience to improve their marketing efforts. W. He and W. Zhang et al. (2019) demonstrated companies can now transform large-scale SMA data into practical customer knowledge that impacts customer's education, habits, and insights. These marketing insights are helpful in driving strategic SMM planning, but Moe and Schweidel (2017) posited the notion that marketers also engage in social listening to monitor brand health and specific campaigns.

Using SMA data to gain competitive advantages is a marketing strategy; however, using data may foster unintended consequences or concerns about this marketing practice. Michaelidou and Micevski (2019) contended these practices offer marketers a trustworthy source of insight using SMA tools; however, they may also create privacy or ethical concerns among consumers/social media users who engage with the company. The interest stems from the unobtrusive way data are recorded, under many circumstances without the user giving their consent or knowledge. Michaelidou and Micevski suggested results of their study demonstrated the need for organizations to be trustworthy and truthful by notifying consumers regarding their SMA practices. Transparency should be considered the best way to implement the use of SMA to all stakeholders.

Social media data analytics has proven to be a sensitive topic which garners more research (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021). SMA must be viewed by small business owners and marketers as a strategic data source providing data-driven decision making. Business leaders should leverage available business intelligence across all viable social media

platforms to gain insight into consumers, employees, and target audience prospects. By understanding these insights and touch points, organizations could increase exposure, foster engagement, and sales opportunities. However, social commerce must align with organizational strategic goals and objectives using SMA.

Customer Retention

One of the biggest challenges in marketing to the fitness industry is retaining current customers while attracting new customers (Bates et al., 2019). Mandal (2016) argued acquisition of new customers is expensive due to the time, focus, and resources necessary to develop relationships beyond transactional to transformational. The author contended the most effective way to retain a higher percentage of customers is to provide better customer perceived service quality, which leads to higher customer satisfaction. Facilities within the health and fitness industry need to better understand their customer base and consider the emergence of social media as a strategic means of developing relationships. Social media can enhance this dynamic by consistently posting appropriate content reflecting service quality and authentic customer relationships (Bates et al., 2019).

Zollo et al. (2020) contended the genesis for customer retention starts with effective relationship marketing over a period. The rationale behind customer retention highlights that acquiring new customers costs five to six times more than retaining existing ones (Bates et al., 2019). Tzavlopoulos et al. (2019) found that quality of service that customers receive is mission-critical in determining their level of satisfaction thereby impacting customer retention. Research has shown a positive relationship between

customer retention and increased revenue (Premkumar & Rajan, 2017). The goal of customer retention is to provide a mutually beneficial exchange between customers and the organization.

Gholston et al. (2016) posited small businesses should use social media for cultivating relationships that target the creation of personal impressions as a building block. De Mesquita et al. (2023) ascertained a plethora of ways fitness managers can influence customers' decisions and modify their intentions through effectively fostering customer retention within their programming. Social media platforms connect diverse demographic segments which leads to a sense of belonging, motivation, and connectivity among members and increases customer satisfaction and retention within fitness clubs (Carter & Alexander, 2020; Geravandi, 2021).

A key to obtaining this strategy is through enhancing perceived customer value, which should lead to a considerable increase in customer loyalty. The increase of customer loyalty helps businesses use customer retention data as objective, measurable data points. These data points are crucial when retaining health club members in a competitive landscape and are essential for company viability and sustainability.

Competitive business owners are usually seeking new and innovative ways to improve marketing to attract new and retain existing customers. Rohde and Mau (2021) found the key in procuring loyal customers begins with using longer-form SMM content that has shown a greater impact on audiences than shorter posts due to elevating essential loyalty-building qualities such as consistency, reciprocity, scarcity, liking, unity, social proof, and authority. These scholars contend business owners should be aware that when

their customer base achieves a large enough number, that reduces the effort, energy, and resources needed to acquire and retain customers.

When managed properly, SMM can produce positive results when building impressions with existing health club members in addition to attracting new customers. Health and fitness facility managers should consider pilot-testing some of their proposed changes or alterations in their products, programs, and services while looking at KPI metrics before investing substantially on whether customer retention impacts the data points. Pilot-testing would also provide managers opportunity to engage in specific social listening activities that monitor engagement associated with new and existing customers (Moe & Schweidel, 2017). By analyzing unique data points, marketers can properly focus their strategic planning.

Social Media in the Health and Fitness Industry

Dessart and Duclou (2019) examined the impact online communities can have on participation within the health and fitness industry regarding attitudes and product-related behavior. They reported high engagement in fitness activities and healthier product choices supporting the future of SMM by enhancing the consumer's attitudes and behaviors through integrated social media and targeted online communities. They went on to theorize that online health and fitness communities offer the group members value through a supportive environment in which members can freely engage with one another while posting comments on social media related to their experiences.

Dong et al. (2019) demonstrated that community group members have a higher propensity to engage with posts shared explicitly on Facebook and Twitter from UGC

instead of auto-scheduled content from within fitness wearable technology applications. In other words, some fitness apps have attempted to push content once a user completes a workout in contrast to the user creating their content post, including photos or videos regarding their exercise. Understanding this dynamic should help marketers create or assign the community group(s) while providing helpful tips for UGC instead of a fitness tracker dictating their pre-programmed content sharing on social media (Stragier et al., 2018).

Bates et al. (2019) posited the notion that launching a selfie campaign within a health and fitness facility might be a useful tactical method to engage followers on Facebook and Instagram within the organization's social media channels as a way to garner excitement. Photographs, comments, liking, and sharing are essential elements needed to achieve the desired impression for online branding and online impression management (Ozansoy Çadırcı & Sağkaya Güngör, 2019). Selfie photos capture a close-up image showing the emotional state of the individual, which is ideal on social media for sharing, commenting, and liking.

Bates et al. (2019) argued that using humor in social media video posts boosts views as a favorable content preference when fun is incorporated on YouTube videos. A practical implication for marketers should be incorporating humor involving serious entertainment garnering higher numbers in viewers' advertising attitudes. Marketers should also consider what constitutes 'appropriate humor' based upon the firm's geographic location and target market reach to avoid any negative consequences to their brand.

Zhou et al. (2018) proposed a conceptual framework for social media-based health information management systems to review the challenges and under-explored research issues which may offer promising directions in the future. O'Donnell and Vollman (2019) posited that health-related content and information searches by consumers continue to rise on search engines and social media. The first step for launching any multimedium strategy is to ensure that all digital marketing tools are optimized for mobile technology and devices.

Grębosz-Krawczyk and Olender (2018) found mobile access can help healthcare providers when integrating the app within their CRM system, which offers the real-time status of a patient's health. Some healthcare providers are creating their own branded apps that include consumer options such as speaking with a physician. Liu et al. (2020) discussed how identifying and recommending YouTube videos provides a vehicle for digital therapeutics that incorporates technology and online solutions to connect patients with complex chronic conditions with personalized, contextualized, and just-in-time content specific to the patient. Social media's role as a viable communication tool in the health care field is still at a stage that creates more questions than can be resolved when analyzing data analytics, governance, ethics, professionalism, privacy, confidentiality, and information quality (Zhou et al., 2018).

Negative Aspects of SMM

Aside from positive aspects of social media, which provides supporting evidence for marketers on strategy, implementation, and best practices to enhance marketing effectiveness, Baccarella et al. (2018) argued that social media's future in marketing also

presents enormous risks for individuals, communities, organizations, and society based on social media's "dark side". Demetis (2020) posited the question, "*What's the worst thing you've done online?";* Demetis then combined a classification system in addition to the empirical data proposed by Baccarella et al. (2018) to formulate a new combined (meta-) classification to articulate the dark and ultra-dark side of social networking. Joint tenants of the "dark side" manifest themselves as cyberbullying, chronic or addictive use, trolling, online cyber witch hunts, fake news, and consumer privacy exploitation (Baccarella et al., 2018; Demetis, 2020). One of the key takeaways from this collective body of research is for private individuals and companies to strongly consider the darker side of social media when planning and implementing phases to avoid negative consequences. Baccarella et al. (2018) concluded their honeycomb framework using seven building blocks including (a) conversations; (b) sharing; (c) presence; (d) relationships; (e) reputation; (f) groups; and (g) identity can provide marketers a useful tool to monitor and gain significant insights into the "dark side" of social media for their brands, patrons, and employees.

Jacobson et al. (2020) introduced a new construct of lofty significance for the future of SMM research that includes applicability of a communication privacy management theory specific to social media based on consumer marketing comfort. The scholars discovered from a legal and practical perspective while third parties such as marketers can mine this social media data made public, there are many people who have shared their discomfort with this practice. Basic tenants of marketing comfort embrace a person's comfort level with content posted for public consumption on social media

channels specific to targeted advertising, customer relations, and consumer behavior. The privacy management theory advocates for consumer privacy management that provides protection over personal information and how it is used on social media platforms.

Sivarajah et al. (2020) argued the challenge of implementing the afore mentioned concept and communication would require all marketers' adherence to this level of ethical standards and transparency. Social media companies should consider adhering to regulations and best practices to protect user privacy while maintaining transparency. The future of social media in marketing needs to strongly consider a way of coming together as a marketing community to develop professional principles and guidelines for social media use and abuse to advocate on behalf of consumers' concerns (Jacobson et al., 2020). Consistent timely monitoring and updates are essential to address these privacy concerns to gain user trust.

Future of SMM

Appel et al. (2020) argued the future of social media in marketing would be shaped through three primary lenses: consumer, industry, and public policy, instead of the currently designated platforms as Omni-social presence examples of Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for social activity. Consumers quickly dismissed celebrity influencers as a trusted resource; however, the emergence of the micro-influencer of people the consumer knows, or trusts is trending in a favorable direction for brands. The authors also noted that micro-influencers increased role on consumers had been impacted partially due to lack of consumer trust with privacy concerns from brands.

The future of social media in marketing reflects a meteoric rise of social media, which has elevated the power of consumers by interacting with products, services, other users, and brands through social media channels and online social networks, thereby creating UGC (A. S. Arora & Sanni, 2019). UGC is an effective way for consumers to share online reviews, ratings, comments, feedback, and real-time engagement with companies and other consumers. UGC can either positively help or potentially harm a brand as consumers share their experiences with other consumers directly from using a company's product or service. These scholars created a new social media-based communications model that fosters a significant influence on consumers and marketers by understanding dynamic relationships and association with the following consumer-to-consumer, consumer-to-firm, firm-to-consumer, and firm-to-firm interactions, thereby creating higher levels of trust. Guha et al. (2018) introduced a newer concept blending social media data with traditional CRM systems to increase sales, custom-tailor communications on products, services, and programs, and offer real-time CRM by integrating social media tools with these processes.

Aleti et al. (2019) investigated the impact of celebrity social media communications on Twitter, which includes personal fitness trainers, on consumer word of mouth. They concluded celebrities most tweet in an ineffective style – producing content consumers simply ignore. In this study celebrity content lacks engagement, which provides strategic benefits to the marketer by using a micro-influencer instead. These scholars also revealed that consumers are more likely to spread content by word-of-mouth in which celebrities entertain them with stories.

The notion of storytelling provides evidence for marketers with another strategy to consider future SMM. Research by these same scholars contended many in SMM garnered further support from politicians as an effective way to share their stories and directly engage voters. This process of using social media channels for storytelling purposes continues to gain momentum when attempting to connect directly with social media engagement.

Researchers have focused on using sporting events to garner an effective social media strategy for connecting with their audience (Nisar et al., 2018). Vale and Fernandes (2018) demonstrated how sports fans engage with social media clubs such as on Facebook from the sports fan perspective. As previously mentioned by A. S. Arora and Sanni (2019) in this literature review, UGC helps organizations determine their sports fans 'why' for engaging with the organization. Marketers can use data analytics to analyze the level and direction of engagement and any behavioral results from a call-to-action content posted on social media by the user. Nisar et al. (2018) posited the notion of interactive and collaborative nature of social media provides new insights for organizations to reinforce unique, specific, and social motivations.

Barlatier and Mention (2020) developed an integrative framework that takes a closer look at the plethora of social media channels that a strategist can implement for decision-making processes. The framework aims to simultaneously identify advantages and disadvantages of adopting and utilizing various social media types to guide organizational identification in expanding, implementing, and directing strategy for innovation. These authors posited the notion that strategists and managers use this

coherent framework to seize prerequisites, potential gains, and barriers of utilizing social media strategy for innovation. While this research area still is in its infancy, social media and innovation deserves managerial attention as this framework truly helps organizations understand the dynamics of the future of social media in marketing (Hazzam, 2021).

To take this notion a step further on social media and innovation, Muninger et al. (2019) introduced a framework to support applications which investigated three essential capabilities as follows: (a) social media marketers who are social media strategists provide planning and implementation of innovation processes; (b) the top management develops and fosters supporting activities which include team empowerment; and (c) agile processes create a culture of quick decision making and business intelligence which flows across teams using data analytics. The organizational capability theory associated with innovation offers social media marketers' data to navigate the implementation of SMM strategies and best practices. These scholars identified one key finding of this research demonstrated social media marketers must possess adequate proficiency to effectively use data-driven information, cultivate ideas, and achieve strategic planning targets with technology. This highlights social media marketers' importance to consider strategic and operational capabilities due to inherent complexities of social media strategic planning and innovation implementation.

Davis and Love (2019) posited the notion that social media data helps researchers and practitioners understand social patterns and their real-time dynamics. However, these scholars argued that data could not be generalized when examined outside the channels of which data analytics generate. Rational choice theory identifying social media fatigue

helps marketers gain insights on how consumers manage social media and the impact on brands. Marketers using social media data might consider the notion of social media fatigue and the capacity to direct broad social questions through framework of formal theory when analyzing consumer behavior (Davis & Love, 2019).

The era of digitalization continues to demonstrate how using social media channels, which includes Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and YouTube for the future of marketing is paramount in creating sustainable brand value and promotion of a company's products and services (Vijay & Srivastava, 2019). Consumers of all demographic age groups and multi-cultural origins regularly access a variety of social media channels to learn about products and services they are interested in. It is mission-critical for marketers to understand how future social media-based marketing should complement traditional evidence-based marketing practices even though the digital age offers real-time data analytics, communication, and search engine optimization for engaging with a company's tribe.

The emergence of smartphones vs. personal computers demonstrated greater inclusion of emotions (both positive and negative) in smartphone-generated content, which connects to other UGC domains across multiple channels (Melumad et al., 2019). As personal technology continues to advance, so do capabilities of integrating social media channels such as with automobiles, smart T.V.s, smartphones, personal computers, and fitness activity tracker apps so consumers can engage with their communities in real-time. The future of social media in marketing has never looked so bright with

possibilities for brands as Fauziyyah and Khusna (2022) contended that digital SMM techniques drive customer loyalty.

In summarizing the literature review section, it must be stated that perhaps the biggest challenge marketers face is acceleration of digital and social media tools that are being introduced and used in the field with little peer-reviewed research due to advances in technology. As demonstrated with the meteoric rise of ChatGPT, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Twitter's rebrand to X, continued impact of influencer marketing, as well as the evolution of monetizing one's own social media channels with YouTube, YouTube Shorts, TikTok and Instagram, content creators have multiple avenues to generate income. It can be overwhelming for practitioners and scholarly researchers to keep up with demand. However, the concept of social exchange theory provides foundation for how small businesses use strategic planning, social listening, automated content scheduling as well as monitoring real-time data analytics for decision-making. SMM is vital to small business as it builds brand awareness, brand equity, consumer engagement that generates leads and sales to specific target markets.

The future of SMM has elevated the power of consumers through UGC for the purpose of creating online reviews, sharing, comments, feedback, and real-time engagement with companies. In addition, building authenticity and transparency within content creation is what consumers demand most from businesses using social media platforms. Consumer privacy management is paramount to building transparency and trust with platform providers. In summary, this literature review provided the reader with

SMM information, insights, and best practices to leverage ever-changing needs and preferences of digital audiences to increase engagement, trust, and revenue generation.

Transition

In Section 1, I focused on the study's foundation, which includes the purpose of the study, which was to explore strategies that small business owners use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement. I provided information regarding the qualitative research method and multiple case study design. I reviewed research questions and interview questions, conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations to foster an in-depth understanding of the study. I also reviewed and analyzed peer-reviewed journal articles from professional and academic literature.

In Section 2, I provided relevant insights regarding my role as researcher, participants, research methodology, and research design. I specifically provided information regarding data collection instruments and techniques, data organization techniques, and data analysis as well as population sampling and ethical research considerations. I addressed validity and reliability of study findings.

In Section 3, I present findings of the study which includes a review of research questions and themes that emerged from research. Also, I discuss how findings may influence or impact small business owners and marketers using SMM strategies within the health and fitness industry. I conclude this section by offering recommendations for further research and insights from the doctoral study journey.

Section 2: The Project

This section includes an outline of strategies for collecting and analyzing data. In Section 2, I restated the purpose statement and discussed my and participants' vital roles and articulate the research method and design. Section 2 includes information about population sampling and ethical research procedures, followed by a review of data collection instruments and organization techniques. I discussed the process for data analysis as well as reliability and validity of results and subsequent conclusions. At the end of Section 2, I provided a transition to Section 3.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies that small business owners use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement. The target population was three small business owners who used SMM strategies for health and fitness facilities within Saint Charles County, Missouri. Implications for positive social change through social media for small businesses is in advocacy, creating awareness, fundraising campaigns, community engagement, promotion and marketing, and collaborations and partnerships (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021).

Role of the Researcher

My primary role as the researcher was to extract detailed and abundant information from participants. Collins and Stockton (2022) argued the primary role of researchers is to function as a conduit through which information from subjects can be exchanged. An important point to consider is using social media may lead to neglecting crucial social and technological distinctions. I asked participants specific questions to

gain insights regarding their preferences, experiences, and perceptions of effective SMM. I served as the primary data collection tool for this qualitative research.

Although DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) found the following disadvantages to semi-structured interviews included: some interviewees are not suitable as quality participants, participants' appearance distracts the researcher, participant not willing to share sensitive information, researcher loses focus of the interview, and the researcher not fully understanding the resources necessary to carry out the recruitment process, interview transcription, and the analysis of data collected; I concluded semi-structured interviews were the best method for this study. Being aware of possible disadvantages, I used a set of preplanned questions to properly implement semi-structured interviews to procure information from small business owners who adhered to participation requirements. Kekeya (2021) suggested exploratory queries can be most effective using open-ended questions while conducting semi-structured interviews.

I specifically crafted interview questions that aligned with the research question while fostering opportunities for exploration and insights according to participants (see Appendix A). According to Castillo-Montoya (2016), researchers must incorporate active listening during interviews without any bias or presumptions while earning participants' trust in the process. I also understood that pauses were normal and carefully monitored verbal and tonal qualities as well as participants' nonverbal actions.

Yin (2017) described the role of the researcher is to demonstrate high ethical standards through professional practices while maintaining academic integrity. Given I am a social media marketer within the health and fitness industry who frequently presents

at professional conferences on the topic of SMM strategies, I understood the role of remaining unbiased during the data collection process. Bierema et al. (2021) contended that research is affected by the elusive nature of subconscious human bias. To remain unbiased, I used neutral language, refrained from reflecting on my own perspectives and was an active listener without interjecting my opinions or judgements.

Belmont Report protocol compliance is mandatory for this study. The purpose of *the Belmont Report* is to protect participants and inform them of the purpose of the study, subject treatment, study time frames, and options to accept or decline invitations to participate in the study. In part, I accomplished this by keeping participants personal information and identity confidential.

Researcher bias is a concern for any study, especially during qualitative research, although there are strategies that can mitigate chances of bias occurring (Birt et al., 2016). I planned to incorporate bracketing as a method to mitigate potential detrimental effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to research. I used triangulation and member checking to ensure validity and trustworthiness of data. I incorporated member checking by sending participants emails with a summary of answers for all six questions to confirm my summary to ensure information was not missing or required further modifications (see Appendix B). I offered to be available by phone or Zoom to respond to anything participants would like to discuss.

Participants

Participant selection is an essential step to ensure data are meaningful for analysis (Yin, 2017). The participant sample consisted of a smaller group selected out of the target

population (Saunders et al., 2023). The study's target population was three small business owners who effectively used SMM strategies for their health and fitness businesses within Saint Charles County, Missouri. All participants were business owners and operated with full oversight of SMM roles.

One primary method to procure participants who own health and fitness facilities was through professional associations such as the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association, Club Industry, American College of Sports Medicine, and National Strength and Conditioning Association. I began by identifying a list of all health and fitness facilities within Saint Charles County and cross-referenced the list for professional affiliations on these associations' web sites. During the interview process, I followed established communication and interviewing protocols (see Appendix A) to promote and support the highest ethical standards and research objectivity.

Research Method and Design

I used qualitative research methodology over quantitative or mixed methods for this study. The qualitative research design involves ongoing exploration and accounting of a phenomenon's context to gain an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings and social constructs (Strijker et al., 2020). Researchers applying qualitative research collect data from participants regarding lived experiences while using face-to-face interviews with predetermined and open-ended questions (Yin, 2017).

Research Method

The qualitative method of inquiry fosters opportunities for researchers to address how individuals interpret the world, impressions of events, and unique view of an

identified subject topic (Rosenthal, 2016). The most appropriate design for this study was the qualitative research method in order to ask business owners open-ended questions about SMM strategies they used to increase customer engagement. As a result, I was able to formulate conclusions to address research questions. I ruled out using quantitative and mixed methods research approaches as I did not plan to investigate any casual relationships or associations through statistical analysis for this research study; therefore, qualitative research was deemed the most appropriate method.

Research Design

The proposed study of inquiry incorporated a multiple case study design using semi-structured interviews. Yin (2017) concluded case study research is the preferred research design when researchers seek to study a phenomenon within a specific population among various evidence from multiple sources. Qualitative study researchers should adhere to taking the proper documented steps to achieve scholarly rigor in the study (Grodal et al., 2021). I selected case study research design as I explored the in-depth strategies small business owners or marketers currently use for effective SMM to increase sales within the health and fitness industry.

Ethnography involves a systematic study of individual cultures or human society (Wutich & Brewis, 2019). Grounded theory collects and analyzes data first and then derives theories. Phenomenology attempts to explain the nature of a phenomenon through a person’s experience. Focus groups involve a group study to capitalize on group communications and observations. After reviewing these qualitative research options, I concluded that case study research would provide the best results.

Fusch and Ness (2015) stated the best way to ensure transferability of data collected in qualitative research is to achieve data saturation by hitting a threshold where no new information or themes emerge. Utilizing member checking aids in data saturation by providing triangulation of information, strengthening validity and reliability of interpretation (Birt et al., 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Triangulation is a standard method that researchers incorporate to provide objectivity when analyzing multiple sources to confirm findings, understand data and offer validity (Joslin & Müller, 2016). Incorporating various independent sources helps researchers understand research findings while strengthening validity by viewing the same issues from different perspectives (Yin, 2017).

Once I administered and transcribed the semi-structured interviews of three small business owners within the health and fitness industry, I began the process of triangulating from a plethora of independent sources to ensure validation of data analysis and conclusions generated from research results. While bias of any kind is always a threat to any research study, the process of triangulation should minimize the risk of my personal biases. To achieve a data saturation level, I followed interview protocols (Appendix B) and asked each interviewee the exact set of interview questions to discover any pattern variances and ensure saturation is present. In final analysis, member checking ensures interview processes will move forward until participants no longer produce additional information or generate new ideas.

Population and Sampling

The study population included three small business owners who effectively use SMM strategies for their health and fitness businesses in Saint Charles County in Missouri. Participants operated in one of the following key SMM roles: Owner, Marketing Manager, or Social Media Manager. Eligibility requirements for recruiting participants in the study demonstrated effective SMM that impacted engagement. Participants were required to sign an informed consent document when meeting the researcher in-person (or virtually due to COVID-19 considerations at the time).

I used purposeful sampling for design of the study. Purposeful sampling offered consistency for cohesive data and information within qualitative research, including individuals with comparable experiences (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Purposeful sampling helps researchers determine cases that will constitute the sample using their judgment (Yin, 2017). Researchers can pinpoint specific characteristics needed from candidates to participate in the study using purposeful sampling (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Additionally, I used a snowball recruitment method approved by Walden IRB (Walden University's approval number 11-18-22-0730583) with the primary investigator's professional network so small business owners of health and fitness businesses within Saint Charles County, Missouri can be contacted through social media channels including Facebook, Facebook messenger, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn as well as their business email and business phone to gain permission to research these participants.

I complied with participant confidentiality adherence and focused during the interview to explore the research question. I navigated the participants into in-person

face-to-face or video conferencing discussions with preplanned open-ended questions. Yin (2017) suggested that researchers maintain small and manageable sample sizes within qualitative research designs.

Scholars argued that qualitative researchers use a sampling plan to identify the sampling method, sample size, and recruiting criteria within their research study (Farrugia, 2019; Lin & Paez, 2020). Averitt et al. (2020) contended researchers pre-determine a research protocol that specifies criterion for study participation. Sampling plans serve to determine specifics of participant selection. Prescriptive plans outlined population, sample size, and methodology procedures for choosing participants used in the study.

Data saturation occurs when member checking yields no new information or themes generated by participants during each interview as Chitac (2022) argued that data saturation is a constant ongoing process rather than a static single point. Member checking raises integrity of the collected data, which produces reliable and trustworthy results aiding the process of data saturation (Birt et al., 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). I found that using the snowball recruitment method was most appropriate for this research study. Farrugia (2019) argued that researchers could reduce their credibility by using the convenience sampling method to select participants as they are mainly selected based upon their availability.

The purposive sampling process begins by identifying health and fitness facilities owners located within Saint Charles County in Missouri. The three final participants chosen to interview for the proposed study were owners who effectively use SMM

strategies for their health and fitness businesses. To ensure an appropriate setting for interviews in consideration of COVID-19 health concerns, I asked research participants for a virtual meeting using the Streamyard platform that was comfortable and safe as well as had minimal distractions. To ensure participants' anonymity, all interviews were conducted using only audio recordings.

Ethical Research

Yin (2017) posited that rigorous academic studies using human subjects must adopt the highest ethical standards and integrity. In academia, adherence to ethical standards and considerations in research begins with the researcher's rigorous process of seeking approval from an institutional review board (IRB), which exists to protect the rights of human participation in the study (Lapid et al., 2019). According to our Walden University doctoral research study rubric, I, as the researcher, must be granted permission by Walden University's IRB before any activity for conducting research begins. Once IRB approved the study, I started recruiting by soliciting organizations that met the requirements to identify interview participants. Walden University provided in writing the criteria for researchers to follow regarding ethical standards and incorporate *The Belmont Report* protocols to protect the study's integrity for moral considerations and codes of conduct.

Researchers followed established ethical procedures during a study which included obtaining informed consent from every interview participants (Shepherd et al., 2021). Informed consent allows researchers to review a detailed description of procedures used and the potential risks associated with the study to ensure protection for each

participant's privacy. Informed consent forms described in detail the purpose of the study, all agreement and study participation information, an invitation to voluntarily and independently participate in the research study, and explicit information on processes to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participants had opportunity to withdraw without penalty at any time by simply choosing not to participate in interviews or terminating the interviews. If a participant withdrew, I would destroy any contact information and data from that participant; no data from that participant would be included in the final study. If individuals wanted additional information, they could either contact me directly via e-mail or discuss participant rights privately with the Research Participant Advocate at Walden University by calling (612) 312-1210.

According to National Research Council (2003) researchers have an obligation to communicate details and purpose of the study, solicit voluntary participation, protect confidentiality and privacy, and take any necessary action to ensure they understand and comprehend the form in order to protect individuals who may be vulnerable when obtaining informed consent. As stated in the Informed Consent, "In appreciation of your voluntary participation, a complete summary of the findings and a $30 Amazon gift card will be sent to you to thank you for your time and efforts." To maintain ethical standards, all research participants were given electronic file codes instead of identifiable names and passwords. A USB drive with all data from the study will remain in a locked drawer for 5 years, securely storing all data to ensure participant confidentiality. I will also protect the identity and information of participants by destroying all information after that time.

Data Collection Instruments

I was the primary data collection instrument in this multiple case study, using semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions (Appendix A) to collect information. Yin (2017) posited that researchers would only enhance their research study by augmenting primary data collection with secondary methods. Saunders et al. (2023) contended using a semi-structured interview acts as a conversation vehicle for generating specific themes that may consist of generalized or specific information on various inquiry topics. Member checking allowed participants to review their own data collection results and confirm their experiences were accurately recorded (Erb & Loppie, 2023).

All semi-structured interviews adhered to interview protocol (Appendix B) for data collection and consistency for interview participants. Castillo-Montoya (2016) argued incorporating an interview protocol during the interview process can guide researchers towards sequencing questions, thereby reinforcing the data collection process. I shared interview protocols with participants at the start of the interview to follow the sequence of interview questions.

Yin (2017) suggested researchers should expect a higher level of quality than using a single source by integrating multiple evidence sources when incorporating the case study design. This scholar reported organizational documents, archival information, records, interviews, direct and participant observations, physical evidence, and artifacts are considered secondary information sources. Chitac (2022) concluded that data saturation is an iterative, ongoing process rather than a static and dormant single point. Castillo-Montoya (2016) noted that using a survey questionnaire and data reports adds to

research results using secondary information sources. For this study, secondary information evidence I planned to use included social media data analytics reports, strategic marketing planning documents, and call-to-action marketing performance reports.

Joslin and Müller (2016) suggested researchers incorporate methodological triangulation to safeguard objectivity in research findings' validity. In this study I used semi-structured interviews, observations, and reviewed social media platform analytics as an additional data collection method where available. Consistent member checking follow-up will directly impact reliability and validity of all instruments used in data collection processes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that member checking could significantly impact credibility regarding the interpretation and reliability of results. Member checking provides researchers opportunity to validate their understanding of interviews by aiming to verify, revise, and substantiate the findings (Birt et al., 2016).

Data Collection Technique

The process of data collection begins with the Walden IRB approval verification in writing. Once IRB approval was verified, I contacted the participants via email to procure participation. Prior to starting the interview during a live Streamyard virtual meeting following all guidelines from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, every participant received verbal instruction of processes I incorporated to secure their personal information and data collected. Offering participants flexibility in selecting the interview date and setting allowed them to make an appropriate decision based on their needs (Dikko, 2016; Saunders et al., 2023). I complied with Walden’s IRB policy that

interested participants must review and sign the informed consent form prior to starting the interview and data collection.

The objective of interviews and document reviews used to answer the following research question: “What strategies do small business owners of health and fitness facilities use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement?” Streamyard audio conferencing was the primary data collection technique for conducting interviews at convenient times preferred by the participant. Braun et al. (2017) concluded that less time-consuming technology, such as conducting virtual interviews when conveniently scheduling participants, is an effective method to procure research information.

I applied various data collection techniques and confirmed evidence from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with interviewee leaders providing SMM data analytics for supporting documentation. In a semi-structured interview, participants share their perspectives via an open conversation, which allows them freedom to add additional information and creates a more dynamic dialogue (Saunders et al., 2023). Castillo-Montoya (2016) posited incorporating interview protocols could enhance data collection accuracy and trustworthiness. I used audio recordings during interviews to allow the researcher to document verbal communication responses.

After data analysis was completed, member checking followed, so every participant received a summary consisting of my comprehension concerning answers provided for each interview question. The summary allowed each participant the opportunity to respond by email and comment on any information missing or

misinterpreted. I also informed participants I would be available by telephone or email to review their information and discuss any thoughts or concerns (Appendix B).

Data Organization Technique

According to Saunders et al. (2023), researchers can protect study participants through planning, securing, and organizing collected data in addition to using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Yin (2017) stated data organization is paramount to fostering a robust research process offering appropriate support for data analysis. Researchers need to demonstrate high ethical standards with research data representing human lives (McKibbin et al., 2021).

I used Streamyard to conduct interviews, Notti.ai to create written transcripts from interviews, and NVivo 12 software to track data. I secured all digital data, audio files, scanned notes, organizational information and reports, and journals on a password-protected electronic drive stored in a locked facility which can only be accessed by myself. To protect each participant's privacy, I incorporated alphanumeric identifiers for all documents, thereby making it impossible to identify participant information. I plan to maintain the electronic information in a locked room for five years at which time I will destroy all electronic files (including the Streamyard mp3 files from interview recordings) as a means to comply with participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process consists of data compilation, identifying emerging themes, and reassembling data from established themes (Yin, 2017). Data compilation began with reviewing transcripts of the interviews and importing all information into

NVivo software analysis program. NVivo software generated themes from the coded information through a thematic analysis function that established duplication of repeated themes from the data.

Coding allows the researcher to use a systematic process to categorize and determine relevant information found within the research (Bennett, 2017). The information was analyzed for consistency, observed theme information, and patterns aligned from previous research investigations utilizing semi-structured interview transcripts. In this study, a single research question navigated the data collection: "What strategies do small business owners of health and fitness facilities use for effective social media marketing to increase customer engagement?"

Accurately categorizing data is the most important aspect of qualitative research (O'Kane et al., 2021). Saunders et al. (2023) identified exploring, analyzing, synthesizing, and transforming data by responding to research questions defines the data analysis process. Yin (2017) contended triangulation might appear in the following five areas of data analysis: (a) compiling, (b) dissembling, (c) reassembling, (d) interpretation, and (e) conclusion. Incorporating triangulation strengthens many data sources found in the same study (Joslin & Müller, 2016).

According to Saunders et al. (2023), reassembling data refers to alignment of specific themes formulated from various random codes specifically related to the research question. The collection of codes formed into themes allows researchers to restructure data as well as organize information in a plethora of ways to achieve more profound degrees of granular scope (Castlebury & Nolen, 2018). I reassembled the data using

NVivo software analysis to assist in the process of drawing conclusions. Yin (2017) has argued the importance of effectively communicating research results using a structured approach when reporting information. Scholars have concluded that data interpretation should not be narrow and specific but rather broad and generalized to understand the research question (Castlebury & Nolen, 2018; Saunders et al., 2023).

Rose and Johnson (2020) suggested researchers must have a strategy for reaching data saturation before the launch of data collection processes. Fusch and Ness (2015) concluded the best way to achieve data saturation is by reaching a threshold where no new information or themes emerge. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) suggested for the researcher to incorporate a six-step thematic data analysis process including the following: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing the themes, (e) defining the themes, and (f) providing a conclusion. To correlate with the literature review topics, I triangulated using the six-step thematic data analysis model to guide the generation of key themes. Establishing a coding process occurred when comparing the coding of the literature review including conceptual framework with the six-step data analysis process.

Reliability and Validity

Yin (2017) concluded integrity of research methods and results for researchers begins by evaluating the reliability of findings. Amankwaa (2016) argued that reliability and validity of research methods must be compelling and worthwhile to illustrate precision within the study's conclusions. Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended findings

made from the body of research must be reliable, trustworthy, applicable, consistent, and remain neutral from any bias.

Reliability

Yin (2017) posited when research findings include very few or no error nor researcher bias that the procurement of reliability is present. The purpose of member checking for consistency within the results demonstrates the attainment dependability within qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is the degree to which a researcher describes research processes in a consistent and reliable manner to ensure the study can be replicated. This notion attempts to ensure if other researchers examine the data, they will see similar findings, interpretations, and conclusions. I committed to using many procedures to establish trustworthiness and reliability within this study, including member checking, audio recordings, creating transcripts, and notetaking as documented evidence during the interview process.

Validity

Zheng and Yu (2019) defined a qualitative study's validity as it relates to its credibility, transferability, and confirmability. I used a scripted interview protocol (see Appendix A) to ensure research conclusions' trustworthiness by providing substantive evidence. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested researchers can improve reliability, enhance creditability, transferability, dependability, and the findings subjected to verification.

Credibility

Natow (2020) concluded specific scholarly actions may improve the creditability and validity of data results through member checking and regimented triangulated protocols. Yin (2017) argued research accuracy and validity of measurements is enhanced by incorporating a triangulated approach within the qualitative research design. Credibility is strengthened through a triangulated process as it grants the researcher ability to gather several sources of evidence to examine a single phenomenon (Jick, 1979).

Birt et al. (2016) posited the notion that using a variety of techniques to cross-check findings may reveal a stronger consistency of results through methodological triangulation. I implemented methodological triangulation to safeguard the credibility of results through cross-checking all interview information collected and substantive secondary source information such as public records, annual reports, and social media data analytics. Using Appendix B, I incorporated member checking for interpreted data and complied with interview protocol, thereby protecting the integrity of my understanding of the participants' perspectives.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the transferability of results elevates through accurate descriptions of all research details. Researchers can easily organize these descriptions by documenting the location and setting of research, participants involved, participants' temperament, and specific nuances that occur during data recording not captured on the audible recording (Amankwaa, 2016). This scholar argued future

research investigations may determine potential extent of the transferability to another research setting. The rationale behind creating detailed descriptions of research elements is to safeguard the transferability of research results, which offers future research to determine if the results are appropriate to apply with future research studies. I adhered to the process of transferability through journaling and securing documentation during the research process.

Confirmability

I adhered to the appropriate action steps to procure confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the need for researcher transparency from various stages and steps within the research process. Johnson et al. (2020) concluded documenting, record keeping, and reporting all information pertaining to the study is essential to confirmability of results. Amankwaa (2016) established the investigative process leads to confirmability through application of triangulating various data points as each data point tells a story.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) contended that reflexivity involves the process of documenting all decisions while supporting the formulation of knowledge and information. Amankwaa (2016) argued researchers could utilize reflexivity in their own biases and viewpoints simply by using a journal that includes all decisions and specific research processes. Based upon these insights, I implemented journaling, reflexivity, and triangulation to raise the confirmability of research found within the study.

Data Saturation

Campbell et al. (2020) posited when redundancy is present by reviewing additional data that data saturation occurs as no new information or insights are available. Lincoln and Guba (1985) concluded validity of results would increase by procuring saturation within the data collection process. Data saturation can occur at some point within the interview process, even though the number of participants may vary between studies (Motulsky, 2021). I interviewed research participants until no new themes emerged to procure data saturation. I incorporated member-checking to increase the integrity of data collected, thereby facilitating a process of reflection to ensure data saturation.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a review of the study's project plan, including a detailed description of the data collection process and data analysis as well as academic standards. I reviewed the purpose statement, my role as the researcher, participants, and research design. I also examined population sampling and ethical research procedures, data collection instruments, data techniques, and data organization. Specific research techniques served to support validity and reliability of the study. I covered findings in addition to applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for future inquiry and future research leading to improved business practices.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to identify and explore SMM strategies that small business owners of health and fitness businesses in Saint Charles County, Missouri used to increase customer engagement. Using semi-structured interviews, I collected data and information on SMM strategies as well as social media data analytics from three participants using methodological triangulation. I used Streamyard to conduct interviews, Notti.ai to create written transcripts from interviews, and email to send transcripts to participants for their review and confirmation. I used NVivo for coding and thematic analysis to formulate potential emerging themes from data.

Interview findings included three themes involving SMM to increase customer engagement: barriers, engagement using social media channels, and KPIs. However, social media data analytics could not be considered for data analysis as they did not tie directly into strategy or company goal setting. In Section 3, I present findings of this research, potential applications to professional practice, implications for positive social change, recommendations for action and further research, reflections, and a conclusion.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question for this study was: What strategies do small business owners of health and fitness facilities use for effective SMM to increase customer engagement? For this multiple case study, I used audio-recorded interviews and social media data analytics to analyze data from three participants (identified as P1, P2, and P3) who own health and fitness businesses and used SMM strategies to increase customer

engagement. Each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes but finished within 60 minutes. After the third interview, no new information or themes emerged, which signaled data saturation occurred as participants provided similar responses during interviews eliminating the need for further interviews.

Deductive coding was used as a predefined framework to align six interview research questions and ensure data directly addressed research objectives, thereby enhancing relevance and depth of interview data. I used NVivo to code recurring themes in interviews. I compared transcripts from interviews, notes, web site and social media channel information, and publications for triangulation. Member checking was used by emailing each participant a summarized version of interview transcripts to carefully review and confirm my interpretations.

Subthemes emerged within each of the main themes. For barriers, concerns of how participants cope with SMM challenges and managing constraints. For engagement, subthemes emerged regarding which specific social media channels participants used and responsiveness of users' levels of engagement in order to procure the most effective strategies. For theme KPIs, strategy and measurement emerged as two subthemes in terms of using SMM to align with business goals.

Table 1 includes themes that emerged from participant interviews. Barriers were mentioned 34 times and during 49% of participant responses. Engagement was mentioned 19 times during 25% of participant responses. The KPI theme was mentioned 18 times during 26% of participant responses. I discussed themes at length as well as

recommendations for measures that small business owners used for effective SMM strategies to increase customer engagement.

Table 1. *Emergent Themes from Participant Interviews*

Emerging Themes	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Barrier Reduction Strategies	34	49%
Engagement	19	25%
KPI's	18	26%
Total	71	100%

Barrier reduction strategies refer to social media challenges participants faced involving using social media and managing barriers. Managing constraints refers to potential and identified barriers small business owners face when using SMM. Successful social media marketers understand balance of time, financial considerations, content production, and use of data analytics. Small business owners must consider ways to address content consistency, brand awareness, and best practices to yield desired results.

Social media engagement refers to the interaction between social media users and the content shared by brands, individuals, or organizations on social platforms. Measurements include likes, comments, shares, video views, engagement, engagement rate percentage and direct messages. More advanced user engagement refers to specific calls to action that are usually associated with instant purchasing, landing pages, and viewing video content. UGC can also positively influence engagement during specific campaigns in which target audiences create content and mention organizations in posts.

KPIs refer to social media performance or the impact on business performance. KPIs included strategies tying SMM to business goals while measuring the performance of goal achievement using social media channel analytics and feedback. KPIs assist marketers with future strategic planning based on results.

Theme 1: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

Overcoming barriers and challenges, specifically in terms of managing social media, was a consistent strategy concern that was mentioned by all participants while discussing effective SMM (see Table 2). It should be noted within the barriers theme (a) SMM challenges and (b) managing constraints make up those barriers.

Table 2. *Frequency and Percentage of Responses Related to Barriers*

Topic	*f*	% of total
SMM Challenges	19	56%
Managing Constraints	15	44%
Total	71	100%

According to the data, the primary theme identified with nearly 50% of participant responses was barrier reduction strategies presenting a challenge to align target markets with appropriate social media platforms. Traditional advertising models have changed, allowing small businesses to be more relevant, competitive, and effective with their marketing strategies. P2 said, “So that strategy is always kind of front of mind of making sure that we're approachable to our clients and who we work with and then

making sure we're targeting the right audiences.” Marketers must understand which SMM approaches work effectively while aligning with their specific target markets.

The three participants shared a similar notion as P3 stated, “And it's using the actual people and using real stories and storytelling is really the way that I feel like we engage people the most on the success of our members, and it just shows that we care about their success and we're bragging about it and showing it off.” The barrier identified is getting ‘actual’ people (their members) sharing their stories on their social media channels which can create influence and impact purchase intention. Gross et al. (2023) argued that emotional storytelling generates more social media user engagement than posts with just neutral content on Instagram.

Another barrier identified in SMM was leveraging the tool for word of mouth as all three participants indicated several challenges with getting their members to generate and share their own content. In the fitness industry, an effective strategy is for businesses to leverage social proof through consumer testimonials which can favorably influence purchasing of products and services. Mainardes and Cardoso (2019) concluded that social media's influence on consumer purchase intention is the cornerstone pillar through the implementation and execution of an effective SMM strategy, which has shown to build trust and loyalty.

Using SMM for in-home fitness services appeared to create a challenge for P2 in reaching their specific intended target market identified as “busy working professionals”. P2 concluded by stating, “so who are our known clients that our brand appeals to those busy working professionals.” This area was not identified by P1 and P3 as they do not

work with or market to in-home training clients. The important takeaway is that not all health and fitness facilities offer services for in-home training clients. In fact, P2 identified that specifically marketing to that target audience is quite challenging for effective SMM.

SMM challenges emerged as a subtheme whereas the small business owners had the perception that SMM has a cause-and-effect relationship similar to traditional marketing when in fact the posted content is a direct impact of how it is perceived by the social media audience. For example, P1 shared, “Especially when I notice that posts are being shared, I go, okay, well, what about that was important? What really connected there? And the comments obviously matter too. Simple stuff.” P2 mentioned “one of the biggest obstacles that we try and overcome is making sure that people think that we are approachable and that it's fine to work out in their living room and that our trainers are everyday looking folks as well as our clientele.” In other words, gaining a deeper understanding of how social media posts elicit certain outcomes was identified as a SMM challenge.

SMM challenges include changes in platforms, emerging new platforms, and significant inconsistencies in terms of predictability of platform algorithms. Twitter has extended maximum video length from 2 minutes and 20 seconds to 120 minutes, while TikTok has gone from 60 seconds to 10 minutes. These types of random changes create challenges when using SMM. Other significant changes or challenges include number of hashtags per platform that can be used in posts. A SMM strategy that works today may not work as well tomorrow due to shifts in social media platforms.

P2 identified budgeting as a SMM challenge from this response, “I think anyone who's making a decision to spend money on anything social media or any business owner who's going down this road really has to kind of obviously understand their budget and where they want to spend their money.” P2 added, “depending on what you need in your business at that moment, it's a great avenue SMM for something like that were depending on your service or what your business is promoting, you may also not get the most quality leads from it.” P2 shared a revelation regarding the amount spent doesn’t necessarily deliver the outcomes such as generating quality leads even though SMM may generate brand awareness. It is important to note distinction between creating content for building brand awareness and posting content requiring a two-way connection of consumer engagement. In other words, spending more money in a specific area of SMM does not guarantee the expected outcomes.

The results reflected some differences among the participants regarding SMM challenges as P1 discussed the challenge of not having a full or part-time social media specialist, “a lot of it's just we don't have a social media person hired to do that or anything like that.” Moreover, both P1 and P3 supported the notion not having a dedicated resource to run their social media makes it difficult to keep up with the updates to the many platforms such as “X” (formerly known as Twitter) and TikTok. SMM created challenges for small business owners who felt overwhelmed with the amount of platform changes and the time required to manage them. The participants agreed frequent changes within various social media ad channel algorithms, contributed as a barrier to managing constraints.

Managing constraints emerged as another subtheme to barrier reduction strategies of effective SMM. In fact, P3 noted, “Currently I'm more of in a rural area, but currently we use both Instagram and Facebook for our SMM”, adding, “We have teenagers all the way up to seniors up in their nineties.” These responses from P3 demonstrated managing constraints or challenges in creating relevant social media content to appeal to specific targets from teenagers through older adult demographics can be confusing and challenging. P1 stated “I haven't traveled into Twitter with the gym, and I haven't traveled into TikTok.” P2 and P3 did not mention these platforms during their interviews.

Barriers and SMM challenges linked to the literature as Muninger et al. (2019) demonstrated that social media marketers must possess adequate proficiency to effectively use data-driven information, cultivate ideas, and achieve strategic planning targets with emerging technology, social media channels, and apps. There may be a considerable gap in the literature regarding specific marketing practices as the platforms, features, and predictability of the channel’s algorithms change frequently creating SMM challenges in keeping pace with best practices. As digital and SMM technology continues to evolve at a meteoric rise, more barriers and SMM challenges are created for small businesses to keep in line with the learning curve.

Mainardes and Cardoso (2019) contended in order to build trust and loyalty leveraging social media’s influence on consumers, content must be delivered through planning, implementation, and the execution of the strategic marketing plan. Future research could offer small businesses the opportunity to implement different marketing

approaches and methodologies. All three participants indicated the need to understand different marketing approaches using data-driven decision-making.

This section reviewed the conceptual framework that links the barriers and SMM challenges for marketers. Webb and Roberts (2016) identified that social exchange theory offers a perspective on how real-time two-way communication can build relationships with the organization's target markets by using effective SMM strategy. However, effectively using the social exchange theory also presented barriers and challenges for these small business owners looking to engage and build relationships with their target audience. Creating social media content that appeals to intrinsic benefits vs. extrinsic benefits creates barriers and challenges for the participants in this study. Chia et al. (2021) contended individuals are more likely to join and engage in social communities pursuant to their gratification from intrinsic benefits rather than extrinsic benefits.

Theme 2: Engagement

While strategies emerged with the highest frequency for themes, business owners indicated increasing customer engagement is key for successful SMM. Within the engagement theme, two topics emerged: (a) SM channel, and (b) responsiveness. Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of using social media for engagement.

Table 3. *Frequency and Percentage of Responses Related to Engagement*

Topic	*f*	% of total
SM Channel	13	54%
Responsiveness	11	46%
Total	24	100%

Sivarajah et al. (2020) argued that while social media reflects as a value-added tool by organizations that foster active user engagement, the ability for companies to procure business intelligence to enhance business productivity is key to effective SMM. P1 suggested, “We talk to them at the gym. We let them know how important it is for us to have that engagement, not only just to build the community, but to help us with getting better algorithms and all that stuff.” The key to engagement is to foster active user engagement as P3 shared, “Kind of more real person and real-life situations that are getting more engagement just than your average promotional post.” Nisar et al. (2018) concluded the interactive and collaborative nature of social media offers new insights for organizations to reinforce the unique, specific, and any additional social motivations that leads to increased customer engagement. Several scholars have supported the notion increased consumer engagement is key for effective SMM (Ham et al., 2019; Sivarajah et al., 2020).

Ham et al. (2019) found that social conversation was the highest driver regarding an individual’s attitude for prompting engagement through sharing information. These scholars indicated the conceptual framework of using the social exchange theory provided insights into how small business owners are effectively utilizing, updating, and monitoring social media channels as engagement plays a role in the 2-way communication. P3 shared regarding the effectiveness of utilizing customer testimonials “We get a lot of our engagement through our stories and through videos of just our people in the facility and kind of sharing posts that other people tag us in the facility too.” However, capabilities identified in the three interviews demonstrated a lack of knowledge

of the small business owners regarding implementation of other social media channels for leveraging engagement aligned to specific target markets.

All three participants acknowledged effective SMM included performance of audience engagement and differed among social media channels when reaching different demographics. For example, according to Stelzner (2023, May 15), Facebook's largest user age range is 25-34 at 23.6% as opposed to just 3.4% for 13–17-year-olds whereas TikTok's generation Z is highest in America as 47.4% of their active users aged between 10-29. Interestingly, none of the three participants used TikTok to build engagement with their target markets despite the fact this platform is the number one short-form video platform from a consumption standpoint.

The social exchange theory also provides marketers opportunity to implement stronger impressions and reach strategically, in-real time, as content can be shared automatically through scheduled content across all social channels through social media enterprise platforms such as Hootsuite and Sprout Social to name a few. Interestingly, P1 revealed that "I haven't used the auto scheduled content yet." P3 indicated "pretty much everything's in real time" and not using any auto-scheduling of content posts. However, P2 stated that "we use a platform called Soshi, and that allows us to schedule out that auto scheduled content, which is more for brand awareness and branding and more generic content, but that still allows us the flexibility of putting real time content out there." In summary, social media enterprise platforms can be used for auto-scheduling content across social media channels to specifically build engagement. Perhaps there is a

lack of knowledge and experience utilizing these automated platforms that provide the organization with real-time engagement and responsiveness outcomes.

In terms of responsiveness, P1 expressed the frustration with the following, “So I feel like I did things right, took my time and picked certain demographics, like targeted the posts. We had one that was kind of targeted a little bit more towards what we would call masters, you know, athletes or lifters, you know, the kind of 50 plus crowd.” P1 added, “And we tried to target it, and I was really disappointed. I'm sure there's ways to do it better, and maybe it's kind of like lottery or something where you got to do it more and more to increase your chances.” P1 concluded with this perspective on lack of responsiveness, “But we didn't even have any engagement, and that was kind of the thing that has kept me away from trying it again. So, I'd be curious to learn more and more about how to optimize that. But we haven't really seen any, if I'm being honest.”

Perhaps the lack of responsiveness had to do with the participants limited knowledge and experience with other social media channels such as TikTok as this platform is the most engaging social media app for engagement. Therefore, when P1 stated, “I'd be curious to learn more and more about how to optimize that”, meaning engagement on other social media channels suggested lack of knowledge and need for help in this area. Similarly, P3 described, “more of them are on Facebook. So, kind of engaging them on there is more effective for us than on Instagram and then also using our tools that we have through our software system, MINDBODY.” It is quite plausible these three participants may have recognized their own limitations of using other platforms such as TikTok as limiting their effectiveness for engagement with social media.

Another consideration for the lack of responsiveness may be found later in the paper under KPI's which provided data regarding engagement performance from another perspective.

Chia et al. (2021) contended interpersonal social exchange is a cost–reward calculation made by individuals derived from a rational mode of exchange which would positively or negatively impact engagement and responsiveness. P1 stated, "I don't think we've had but maybe one or two people over the last I'd say a year and a half at the most, that we've really been strict about posting consistently. And we've only had like, probably one to three, I'd say at least no more than five people that really signed up because of our social media alone. Meaning they found us on it and came to the gym and signed up based off of that."

Because this study was qualitative, the actual social media content posted by the participants only examined engagement and responsiveness by social media platforms themselves. In other words, there was no content analysis conducted by the researcher or the participants to validate the quality and quantity of measurement for engagement. In order for this type of analysis to be accurate, businesses need to be consistent with posting content. The same would hold true for the responsiveness rates using real-time data for analysis. Understanding how vital the intrinsic joy and gratification individuals derive from influencing others using social media channels is, should help small business owners increase engagement.

The engagement theme aligned to the implementation of using social media channels and responsiveness within literature. Shang et al. (2022) argued achieving

customer engagement is essential for small business owners. Every social media channel offers marketers certain advantages and disadvantages based upon the organizations' goals and objectives for using the channels. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the responsiveness to building engagement with a specific target market is paramount for implementing an effective social media strategy. Achen (2017) concluded the social exchange theory provides small businesses' insights into strategic planning, social listening, and monitoring in real-time social media channels.

Theme 3: KPI Impacts on Businesses

KPI's impact on business was the third theme, as all three participants indicated its value and importance. Specifically, how to utilize KPI's information for strategic planning and measurement tools such as data analytics for assessing the effectiveness of the various social media channels. Within the KPI's impact on business theme, two sub-topics emerged: (a) strategy, and (b) measurement. Table 4 shows the frequency and percentage of total responses to KPI's impact on business.

Table 4. *Frequency and Percentage of Responses Related to KPI's Impact on Business*

Topic	*f*	% of total
Strategy	30	79%
Measurement	8	21%
Total	38	100%

This section uncovers the continued challenge of aligning target audience to the social media channel which can negatively impact the ROI. P2 stated, "So for our direct to client services. We focus a lot more on Facebook and Instagram, and then we're using

LinkedIn for those same avenues." P2 further added that "for us having that direct ROI from doing things like Facebook or Instagram ads did not." P2 concluded that "especially in the beginning I thought those things would be great avenues to drive a lot of eyes to our brand and in turn clients. But we do find that a lot of our clients that come from those platforms are not as committed as somebody who is finding us through other avenues." An interesting insight from "are not as committed" may be seen as not "as engaged" through leveraging the 2-way communication supported by the social exchange theory.

Strategies emerged with highest frequency (30) for themes found in this study as all three business owners discussed a plethora of strategies and concerns, they used for SMM to increase customer engagement. P1 also shared the key for strategy to be effective is it must increase customer engagement as noted, "I'd be curious to see what the outcome of is of the research. But for stuff that we do is what we found is that to increase engagement, one, we ask people to just engage a little bit more." One thing that all three small business owners shared that created the need to manage constraints was the lack of using effective social media paid ads as P2 offered this notion on the subject, "For us having that direct return on investment (ROI) from doing things like Facebook or Instagram ads did not."

When P1 was specifically asked to identify the strategies, their business was using to engage customers in their SMM, the response suggested the need to better understand SMM strategy stating "So I'll first start with this is an area that I don't feel that we are experts at by any means." P2 responded to the same question and stated that "the strategies that we try and use to engage our customers is one, making sure that we have

content out there that makes our business model and our services relevant and relatable to our clients." P3 responded to the same question by stating the following: "We use both Instagram and Facebook for our social media marketing. We get a lot of our engagement through our stories and through videos of just our people in the facility and kind of sharing posts that other people tag us in in the facility too. Kind of more real person and real-life situations that are getting more engagement just than your average promotional post."

Business owners need to know the difference between brand awareness and brand exposure versus spending their money specifically on lead generation which is a hard number to calculate the ROI in which engagement plays a critical role. P3 mentioned, "Just with the engagement. And then also whenever we boost a post, you can kind of monitor who your demographic is and what your engagement is and how many views that you're actually getting on it." The participants indicated their frustration with spending money on the SMM specifically to engagement and not seeing a direct correlation to the desired results.

It was interesting to note that none of the three participants indicated in their responses to the customer engagement question that setting specific business goals or using KPI's was aligned directly to their SMM. P3 did feel that their SMM strategy was to "keep it real and raw. In our situation where I'm trying to sell a community. Sell something beyond just the gym. People can feel our ultimate fitness plus family through our social media." It was interesting to see that no actual data or KPI's from their analytics supported these strategies on business performance.

KPI impact on business performance linked to the conceptual framework as Gholston et al. (2016) concluded that small businesses need to focus on creating relationships, increasing brand exposure, relationship building rather than just measuring sales. Various studies explained how specific social media content could increase business performance through customer engagement or simply liking SMM posts (A. Arora et al., 2019; Duan & Zhang, 2021; Khan et al., 2019; Michopoulou & Moisa, 2019; Shay & Van Der Horst, 2019). Conceptual framework influenced by the social exchange theory demonstrated how real-time two-way communication can build relationships with companies' audiences through using effective SMM strategy (Ratchford, 2020). The ability for small business owners to effectively utilize social media content while data mining their engagement is linked to the concept framework.

In addition, KPI impact on business performance is linked to the literature as the social exchange theory revealed how small companies use strategic planning, social listening, and monitoring in real-time social media channels (Achen, 2017). H. G. Kim and Wang (2019) found that social CRM offers a company the ability to leverage collaborative effort between the customer and business to find a common ground of trust. The future of SMM has started to use social CRM capabilities to provide a stronger predictor of business performance through strategic and new tactical approaches. Lou and Koh (2017) contended successful marketing is a top priority for small business owners to ensure strategic company goals are aligned to KPI. Organization's leveraging their KPI and other metrics while integrating the use of social media platforms with consumers is paramount for success.

Popescu and Tulbure (2022) posited the notion social media and SMM for small businesses can be implemented as an effective and low-cost way to improve the firm's overall performance. These scholars contended guidance in SMM is paramount to cultivating relations with clients, increase customer engagement and improve overall marketing performance. The business impact of using SMM for small businesses was undeniable and seen as a competitive advantage. Althuwaini (2022) concluded that SMM strategies can increase customer trust in a business. Katrodia (2022) examined traditional vs. digital marketing and concluded that SMM empowers customers in a way that traditional marketing never has.

As reflected in this research study, small business owners often experienced challenges with limited resources, budgets, and time, impacting the ability to build relationships with their target markets. The key for small business owners is to understand that despite budget and resources barriers and challenges, initially deciding upon a competitive advantage to communicate through SMM marketing. Leveraging the social exchange theory provided insights on how small businesses use strategic planning, social listening, and monitoring in real-time social media channels (Achen, 2017). Participants in this study confirmed the notion of Gruss et al. (2020) findings that effectively using social media begins with small businesses creating relationships, increasing brand exposure, and being intentional about creating personal connections.

Additionally, the participants also mentioned another barrier and constraints of driving customer engagement was through SMM and measuring the SMA data results in real-time. This barrier and constraint aligned with the literature as Tam and Kim (2019)

confirmed that SMA tools are a practical strategy for developing real-time data points while providing real-time analysis by assisting small business owners in understanding the nuances of each specific social media platform. Prioritizing SMM strategies and managing constraints are essential to establishing, maintaining, and increasing customer engagement through social media content the consumer values.

Applications to Professional Practice

Small business owners now possess power to compete in a highly competitive landscape through the implementation of effective SMM (Popescu & Tulbure, 2022). Before the availability of SMM, the social exchange theory was limited between at least two parties offering an exchange of activity whether it is tangible or intangible due to speed, ease of platform use, and lack of real-time two-way communication issues. Effective SMM strategies and proper execution can quickly garner customer trust in a firm (Althuwaini, 2022). Pornsrimate and Khamwon (2021) argued consumers do expect some free content in SMM from brands prior to becoming loyal customers.

However, it is important to point out issues related to the usage of SMM such as identifying best channels and finding the best combination of paid and free tools, needs further inquiry and research (Popescu & Tulbure, 2022). Study participants comprised of three small business owners from the interviews discussed a plethora of specific SMM strategies they have implemented to increase customer engagement. Beard et al. (2021) contended the important need of educating consumers through SMM messages.

Building relationships through SMM can be achieved using photographs, comments, liking, and sharing as they are essential elements needed to achieve the

desired impression for online branding and online impression management (Ozansoy Çadırcı & Sağkaya Güngör, 2019). Indrawati and Shabila (2020) concluded gaining customer loyalty begins with crafting quality content that customers perceive as trustworthy while fostering repeated positive experiences consumers feel motivated to share with others. The application of business practices should include using these social media tools for amplifying social change while connecting a healthy community.

Implications for Social Change

No research study is complete without careful consideration of the implications for social change. Possibilities for social change could occur providing business leaders are willing to adopt to this ever-changing environment of using effective SMM. Examples of social change through social media for small businesses are in advocacy, creating awareness, fundraising campaigns, community engagement, promotion and marketing, and collaborations and partnerships (Danhoff & Krebs, 2021).

Adomako et al. (2021) identified strategic planning experts can convey beneficial knowledge to internal and external customers. Leveraging social media strategies and tactics could allow local small businesses to not only effectively engage with their communities, but also build strong relationships with customers worldwide while building brand awareness. Additionally, digital and SMM could be a great vehicle to advocate for causes important to individual communities thereby fostering positive social change.

Recommendations for Action

Social media and SMM for small businesses can be implemented as an effective and low-cost way to improve the firm's overall performance (Popescu & Tulbure, 2022). Althuwaini (2022) contended effective SMM strategies with proper execution can quickly influence customer trust. Dwivedi et al. (2022) argued effectively using new SMM technologies boost business sales. As a result of my study, I recommend small business owners (a) prioritize SMM strategies that directly align with their target market and business goals, (b) manage constraints such as posting SMM content featuring their clients on a consistent basis, (c) establish, maintain and increase customer engagement through posting rich interactive content clients value, (d) seek out opportunities to grow and develop in digital and social media, (e) utilize social listening to stay abreast of emerging technologies, tactics, and tools, and finally (f) use data such as KPI's to drive future SMM decisions.

The results of this study might be disseminated in literature especially as more new tools are coming into existence like the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on SMM. I am currently writing my third textbook titled, *Disruptive Digital and Social Media Marketing* as this topic of AI is being included. Furthermore, attending and presenting sessions on SMM best practices would be excellent for conferences and training. I recently presented at a nation conference regarding the impact of social media on mental health in teens as their usage continues to rise so does anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideology increases.

Recommendations for Further Research

Small business owners must continue to develop SMM strategic planning and use of data analytics aligned to the firm's business goals to achieve success. While the sample of this study is not big enough to generalize, the study offers a limited perspective on the ways that SMM strategies increase customer engagement for small businesses within the health and fitness industry. Considerations for inherent limits may be applicable to risks associated to other business industries, researcher bias, and using a qualitative research study design. This study specifically explores how small business owners in the health and fitness industry incorporate SMM strategies to increase customer engagement. My recommendations for further research include the following: (a) during the interview ask participants to identify their business goals as they pertain to their SMM strategies, (b) incorporate the use of select data analytics and KPI's that align with the firm's business goals, and (c) expand the research beyond Saint Charles County Missouri, and the fitness industry.

Reflections

Completing this study has been a labor of love given the fact I co-authored two books on digital and SMM and am finishing up a third book, all during the process of researching and writing this doctoral study. This doctoral degree from Walden University means so much to me as I get set to send the final revisions of my first textbook to the publisher. I cannot wait to see my name followed by DBA on the front cover. Perhaps what I am most looking forward to is being able to chair doctoral research in digital and

social media as a content expert. I want to come alongside future researchers as they continue to fill holes and gaps in the scholarly literature.

Conclusion

Small business owners play a significant role in their companies SMM, building quality and trust with potential and existing clients through various social media channels. Emerging themes develop through interviews of small business owners that utilize SMM for their businesses within the health and fitness industry in Saint Charles County Missouri to increase customer engagement. Althuwaini (2022) confirmed that utilizing effective SMM strategies and proper execution can quickly influence customer trust.

In this study, the participants utilize SMM strategies to demonstrate the various ways they communicate and connect with their target audience. In contrast, the participants share aspects of SMM in which more education and understanding is needed. The research establishes the effectiveness of their SMM as perhaps repeatable for other businesses within the health and fitness industry.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What strategies are you using to engage customers in your social media marketing?
2. What social media channels are you using to increase sales within your social media marketing?
3. What if any, strategies are you using to post auto-scheduled content and in real-time social media marketing content?
4. In what ways do you measure the effectiveness of your social media marketing strategies?
5. What social media marketing strategies did not add value as planned?
6. What additional comments would you like to add relating to the effective use of your social media marketing strategies?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Step 1 – Introduce the interview and set the stage.

SCRIPT: Hello. My name is Guy Danhoff, and I am a doctoral student in the Doctor of Business Administration program at Walden University. Thank you for taking the time to participate in the study titled "Social Media Marketing Strategies to Increase Revenue in the Health and Fitness Industry." Please be advised the interview will be recorded and is kept confidential.

Step 2 – Ask the interview questions.

SCRIPT: See below.

1. What strategies are you using to engage customers in your social media marketing?
2. What social media channels are you using to increase sales within your social media marketing?
3. What if any, strategies are you using to post auto-scheduled content and in real-time social media marketing content?
4. In what ways do you measure the effectiveness of your social media marketing strategies?
5. What social media marketing strategies did not add value as planned?
6. What additional comments would you like to add relating to the effective use of your social media marketing strategies?

Step 3 – Finish the interview and offer thanks to the participant.

SCRIPT: I would like to personally thank you for taking the time to participate in the study.

Step 4 – Schedule confirmation date regarding participant follow-up by email for member checking.

SCRIPT: The next steps involve reviewing the video recording from today's interview and providing you with a summary of my comprehension from the answers provided for all six questions within the next few days.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study about social media marketing strategies for health and fitness facilities. The researcher is inviting three owners, marketing managers, or social media managers from three health and fitness facilities located within Saint Charles County in Missouri. I obtained your name/contact info via through using networks within professional associations such as the International Health, Racquet, and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA), Club Industry (CI), American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM), and National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA). This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before committing to participation. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Guy Danhoff who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore the strategies that small business owners, marketing managers, or social media managers use for effective social media marketing to increase customer engagement. The purpose of participation is to collect data for a doctoral research study at Walden University in the college of Management and Technology.

Procedure:

- You will be asked to complete a one-on-one interview.
- The interview will be conducted via Zoom.
- You will be asked to appear on camera during the interview.
- The interview is anticipated to last about an hour.

- The interview will be recorded via Zoom recording feature to ensure accuracy of the data collected.
- Following completion of the interview you will be asked to participate in member checking which involves reviewing a summary of your answers as transcribed by the researcher for validity. Review of the summary will take approximately 15-20 minutes.

Here are some sample questions:

- What strategies are you using to engage customers in your social media marketing?
- What social media channels are you using to increase sales within your social media marketing?
- What if any, strategies are you using to post auto-scheduled content and in real-time social media marketing content?

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time, even after the interview is complete.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The risks associated with being in this study include a possibility of identity being revealed and employees discovering social media marketing strategies from responses made in the interview. Participant identities will be coded and only available to the researcher.

Benefits associated with being in this study may include highlighting social media marketing strategies to increase engagement within the health and fitness industry.

Payment:

There will be no incentive offered for voluntary participation in this research study.

Privacy:

Reports coming out of this study will not share identities of individual participants. Details that might identify participants such as name, facility name, facility address will not be shared. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purpose outside of this research project. Data will be kept secure by storing on a password protected external drive and locked in a safe space where only the researcher has access. Data will be kept for a period of at least five years as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher, Guy Danhoff at Guy.Danhoff@waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at Walden University at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 11-18-22-0730583 and it expires on November 17, 2023. Please print or save this consent for your records.

Obtaining Your Consent:

If you feel you understand the study well enough to decide regarding your participation, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I consent."

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of Consent _____