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Influence of Social Media on Business Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises

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Annmarie Calvert-Antoye

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Walden University
2024

Influence of Social Media on Business Performance of Small and Medium Enterprises

by

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MS, American InterContinental University, 2015

BS, American InterContinental University, 2014

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2024

Abstract

Despite the significant advantages of using social media marketing, an estimated 25% of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) promote products and services through social media. However, the lack of use by many convenience store managers often results in missed opportunities for increasing sales revenue and reaching a broader customer base. Grounded in the technology acceptance model, this qualitative descriptive study explored convenience store owners' social media strategies to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. The participants were eight convenience store owners in the Midwestern United States. Data were collected using semistructured interviews and a review of public documents. Three themes emerged through thematic analysis: (a) diverse, cost-saving social media strategies; (b) social media strategies tend to increase customer base and revenue; and (c) social media strategies increase brand awareness and positive customer-employee interactions. A key recommendation is for convenience store owners to incorporate social media tools that would help promote the brand and reach more consumers, resulting in an overall increase in sales. The implications for positive social change include the ability to help small business owners, especially convenience store managers, learn to apply social media marketing strategies to increase their customer base and revenue, thus helping the community they serve.

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Dedication

Reflecting on my journey, I recall being the first person in my family to achieve my master's degree. Now, as I stand on the threshold of earning my doctoral degree, I dedicate this milestone to the girl who works very hard to accomplish her goals herself through God's divine intervention: me. I sacrificed my aspirations to nurture my remarkable daughters. Through God's grace, I completed my degree, redeeming lost time. Additionally, I dedicate this accomplishment to my mother and father, who earnestly wished for my return to academia. Though they are not here to celebrate with me, I find solace in knowing my mother would be very happy and excited while my father will be very joyful with me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

This study was focused on understanding how social media marketing influences the organizational performance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Section 1 is an overview of the rationale and the methods of the study. A background of the problem is provided in the following subsection, followed by the business problem focus and project purpose, and the research question. The assumptions and limitations of the study are then discussed, followed by a transition to the next section, which is a literature review.

Background of the Problem

Social media marketing is a dynamic approach that allows companies to maintain their profile online, post pictures, videos, and stories of their products, respond to comments, share, and like products (Basri & Siam, 2019). Although social media marketing is more often associated with large enterprises, approximately 75% of SME managers utilize social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their businesses (Dwivedi et al., 2021; Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Haseeb et al., 2019; Saleem et al., 2021; Tolstoy et al., 2021). The use of social media marketing can have several positive impacts on SMEs. Marketing through paid advertisements on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have millions of users, also increases brand awareness for SMEs. SME owners can utilize those platforms to raise public awareness of their businesses and brands.

Other social media activities, such as micro-blogging, social networking, online forums, and customer reviews, can further increase brand awareness for SMEs (Maldonado-Eraza et al., 2020; Pizzi et al., 2020). Increased brand awareness can lead to

SMEs' receiving increased consumer interaction (Cheng & Shiu, 2019; Moy et al., 2020) and an expanded customer base (Bartolacci et al., 2020; Cheng & Shiu, 2019; Kraus et al., 2019; Song et al., 2022). The increased consumer interaction and customer base obtained through social media marketing are associated with increased revenues for SMEs. The focus now shifts from the background of the problem to the specific problem statement.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

Despite the significant advantages for SMEs that utilize social media marketing, an estimated 25% of SMEs are not yet promoted through social media (Tolstoy et al., 2021). SME managers' not using social media marketing is associated with lower brand awareness, decreased customer base, and lower revenues (Bartolacci et al., 2020; Cheng & Shiu, 2019; Kwon et al., 2021; Lupo & Stroman, 2020; Neilson & Gibson, 2022). The specific business problem is that some owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States lack strategies for using social media to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. Therefore, in this qualitative descriptive study, I aimed to explore the social media strategies SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. The specific targeted population was the convenience store market owners in the Midwestern United States who use social media marketing to increase brand awareness.

The target population was convenience store market owners in the Midwestern United States who use social media marketing to increase brand awareness. I used a

purposeful sampling method to recruit a sample of at least eight participants. Braun and Clarke (2013) indicated that data saturation may be reachable with eight participants. The inclusion criteria for the sample were (a) SME owners, (b) in the convenience store market, (c) in the Midwestern United States, (d) for at least 2 years, (e) who have used social media marketing to promote their businesses, (f) for at least 6 months. The data sources were one-to-one, semistructured interviews with the participants. The owners were asked about their strategies for using social media to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance.

Nature of the Study

The study was conducted using a qualitative methodological approach. Qualitative research typically involves open-ended verbal data collection (Gioia, 2021). Qualitative approaches enable researchers to collect open-ended data in participants' own words grounded in participants' specific individual, social, and organizational contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The qualitative method is appropriate because SME owners' use of social media marketing to increase brand awareness is expected to depend highly on social and organizational contexts. Therefore, using a qualitative method enables a researcher to collect open-ended data about participants' perceptions of contextual influences.

Quantitative and mixed methods were also considered for this study but were deemed inappropriate. Quantitative methods focus on the collection and analysis of numerical data. Data in quantitative studies are collected through surveys, questionnaires, and polls. According to Osborne (2008), quantitative methods are suitable for less

detailed research projects. However, because this study was focused on exploring the social media strategies that SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance, in-depth qualitative data were required. Therefore, quantitative methods were not suitable for this study. Mixed methods combine the factors of qualitative research and quantitative research to address the problem under study. Ivankova and Creswell (2009) noted that mixed methods help researchers understand the phenomenon under study. In this study, no quantitative data were collected; therefore, a mixed methods approach was unsuitable.

I used a qualitative descriptive design in this study. Qualitative descriptive research typically involves collecting semistructured interview data from a purposeful sample of participants (Doyle et al., 2020). A qualitative descriptive design was appropriate for this study because it enabled me to focus on an external, real-world phenomenon, such as social media marketing use, as the participants in the study perceive and experience it (Conlon et al., 2020; Doyle et al., 2020). While other qualitative designs, such as phenomenology and grounded theory, are theory-driven and involve data collection and analysis filtered through theoretical constructs, a descriptive design enables a researcher to stay close to the data, to understand a real-world phenomenon as the study participants' experience and describe it.

In phenomenological design, a researcher explains the nature of the phenomenon under study using people's experiences (Mhatre & Mehta, 2023). Phenomenological research focuses on the universal essence of a phenomenon; therefore, the design was

inappropriate for this study. Grounded theory research identifies and constructs a theory from data (Belgrave & Seide, 2019). Grounded theory is a well-known methodology that has been applied in many research projects. In this study, no theory was constructed, hence a grounded theory design was inappropriate.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was: What social media strategies do SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance?

Operational Definitions

The following terms are provided with their definitions for this study:

Financial performance: The extent to which company policies are helping an organization to remain financially stable (Haseeb et al., 2019).

Market performance: How a firm's product or services perform, including the degree to which the product share in the market changes against rival products (Kim & Shim, 2018).

Organizational performance: The extent to which an organization is achieving its goal. There are different types of organizational performance, including financial performance, market performance, and shareholder performance (Kim & Shim, 2018).

Shareholder performance: How well or poorly a company satisfies a shareholder's interests (Bauman & Lucy, 2020).

Social media marketing: A marketing approach that allows companies to maintain their profile online; post pictures, videos, and stories of their products; respond to

comments; and share and like products through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Basri & Siam, 2019).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

Assumptions are propositions of the truth that must be assumed for a study to be meaningful but not proven in the study context (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). The first assumption in this study was that study participants would provide accurate responses during their interviews. To mitigate the threat this assumption poses to the data's internal validity (credibility), at least eight participants were interviewed, and the findings in this study were emergent themes that incorporate the perspectives of all or most participants. This procedure minimized the potential influence on the significant findings of individual participants' biases or errors when most participants do not share those sources of inaccuracy.

The second assumption made for this study to be meaningful was that the findings were transferable to samples and settings other than those from which they are drawn. Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, study findings are not meaningful if they cannot be transferred beyond the sample from which they were drawn through readers' case-by-case comparison of the study sample and setting to other specific samples and settings (Osbeck & Antczak, 2021). To mitigate the potential threat to transferability posed by this assumption, inclusion criteria for the sample and demographic data about the sample are reported in this study to enable readers to assess transferability.

Limitations

Limitations are restrictions to the scope of the study that are entailed by the methodology or procedures (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first limitation of this study was that qualitative research is neither objective nor generalizable (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Instead, qualitative findings are grounded in the contexts and perspectives from which they are drawn, and transferability to other samples and settings must be assessed on a case-by-case basis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). This limitation poses a potential threat to transferability. The threat was mitigated by providing information about sample inclusion criteria and demographics. A further limitation of this study was the data collection procedure, which involved one-to-one semistructured interviews. This limitation potentially threatens the study's credibility because the data relied on participants' self-report. This threat was mitigated by identifying as significant study findings only those emergent themes that incorporate the perspectives of all or most participants.

Lastly, researcher bias can threaten the conformability of study findings in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This threat was mitigated through a member-checking procedure that allowed participants, via email, to review and either verify or recommend corrections to preliminary researcher interpretations of their data. This threat was also mitigated by providing direct quotes from the data as evidence for all findings in the presentation of results so the reader can verify independently that the interpretations of the data are unbiased.

Delimitations

Delimitations are restrictions to the study scope voluntarily imposed by the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The first delimitation in this study was the small sample size of eight participants, which might threaten the transferability of the study findings. However, small sample sizes are standard in qualitative research, in which data collection and analysis are resource-intensive, and the cost in time and resources of conducting studies with large samples is therefore prohibitive (Palinkas et al., 2015). The geographic delimitation of the study to the Midwestern United States and the delimitation of the target population to owners of SMEs in the convenience store market might have further limited the transferability of the findings to enterprises of other sizes, enterprises in different markets, and enterprises in other geographic locations. Sample demographics and thick descriptions of the findings are provided to assist the reader in assessing transferability.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that the research could provide SME owners and managers with insights into the impact of their social media marketing initiatives. The findings could provide insights into the influence of the social media marketing strategies adopted by SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States and yield recommendations that might help SME owners improve their strategies. The findings may help SME managers and owners identify the most impactful social media marketing strategies to improve customer relationship management and brand awareness.

The findings may also enable the managers and owners to develop well-informed social media marketing policies to attain their business goals. Based on the results of this study, changes made to SMEs' marketing policies may improve organization competitiveness. In particular, the managers and owners of the SMEs may draw crucial lessons on the best social media marketing practices that will enable them to improve their market outreach, brand awareness, sales, and profitability (Shaheen & Pradhan, 2019). Social media use can help SMEs achieve their growth goals through practical social media marketing activities. Consequently, the SMEs may be able to expand their operations and employ and retain more employees, thereby leading to positive social change.

Section 2: The Literature Review

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This qualitative descriptive study was conducted to explore how SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use social media to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. Using the technology acceptance model, the problem statement, research questions, and the purpose statement as guides, I conducted a comprehensive review of professional and academic literature. I organized the literature review as follows: social media, social media marketing, organizational performance, and the influence of social media on the performance of SMEs. The keywords I used were *social media*, *business performance*, *small and medium enterprises*, *marketing*, *interactions*, *sales*, *brand awareness*, and *profitability*. The databases used included Google Scholar, ProQuest Research Library, JSTOR, ERIC, and EBSCO Information Services. Using filters in Walden Library's databases, I limited the searches only to include peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024. I used 78 sources in the literature review, of which 95% are sources published in 2019 or later, and 98% are peer-reviewed. Sources published before 2019 are included in the literature review to add context and provide a historical viewpoint.

Theoretical Framework

The theory for this study was the technology acceptance model, developed by Davis in 1986 (Davis, 1989, as cited in Silva, 2015). The model includes a framework for evaluating the factors influencing individuals' use and acceptance of new technology, such as social media (Davis, 1989, as cited in Silva, 2015). The model is among the

popular models for predicting use, individuals' intention to perform a specific behavior, and technology acceptance (Rahimi et al., 2018). Initially, the model was derived from the theory of reasonable action and planned behavior. According to the model, adopting new technology depends on positive attitudes toward perceived usefulness and ease of use. However, the two factors are mediated by characteristics of technology and system usage. As per the model, new technology is more likely to be accepted by individuals if it is perceived as easy to use.

Similarly, technology is more likely to be adopted if it is associated with a perception of high usefulness. According to the model, SME owners are more likely to adopt social media marketing strategies if they perceive them as helpful in improving the brand awareness of their stores (Tiwasing, 2021). The owners are also more likely to use such social media marketing strategies if they perceive them as easy to use. The technology acceptance model was selected for this study because it can provide insights into the factors influencing SME owners' social media adoption.

Social Media and Brand Awareness

Social media refers to internet-based applications where social interactions between people or groups are initiated and achieved through creating and sharing information (Ali Qalati et al., 2020). Since the advent of technology in the early 1980s, social media has become one of the most reliable platforms for social interaction and business engagement (Cheng & Shiu, 2019). As of 2020, it was estimated there are nearly 3.6 billion active social media users globally (Moy et al., 2020). The figure is expected to grow, with younger users adopting social media as primary communication and

engagement channels. Combined, the evidence reviewed demonstrates that social media has become prevalent and widely used by billions of people globally.

Additional research has shown that social media has continued to be a powerful instrument of communication. Kraus et al. (2019) reported that social media websites and platforms have become the primary platforms of knowledge creation, sharing, and engagement in people across age groups and genders. The common tools used in social media instruments include computers, cell phones, and routers to access the internet (Song et al., 2022). With billions of people using social media daily, the new technology has dramatically influenced and changed how business is conducted globally. Social media networking could positively impact a business by enhancing its brand identity or awareness in the market of a large population.

There are different types of social media platforms currently being used. The common social media platforms include Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. As of 2020, statistics estimate that Facebook had at least 2.4 billion users globally (Kwon et al., 2021). Other highly used social media platforms, Twitter and Instagram, allow organizations to post information about their product or make business-related communications (Hanell et al., 2020). Neilson and Gibson (2022) investigated the most used social media platforms and found that Twitter and Facebook are the most widely used platforms by entrepreneurs. In agreeing with Hanell et al. (2020), Li et al. (2021) also reported that most entrepreneurs surveyed in the study use Twitter and Facebook to target customers. Males and Cherry (2021) revealed that local and international firms use Twitter or Facebook to target and communicate with their customers. Supporting this,

Susanto et al. (2021) also found that of 133 business leaders surveyed, 75% reported using Twitter to reach more customers. The evidence indicates that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are the most widely used platforms in business operations.

Although researchers found corporations such as Facebook and Instagram to be major social media users, other studies have found that SMEs also use Twitter. Tolstoy et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the use of social media platforms in SMEs on a sample of 325 users. Researchers found that 75% of the managers surveyed reported using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their businesses (Lupo & Stroman, 2020). Saleem et al. (2021) also revealed that most SMEs use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to increase their preference and market their products. Although social media has been exemplary in large corporations, SMEs increasingly use social media platforms to improve their performance.

Different social media platforms are used differently. For instance, hashtags are widely used to reach more customers on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Males & Cherry, 2021). The hashtag lets individuals view company-related content from third parties (Maiorescu et al., 2020). Saleem et al. (2021) also noted that companies could use hashtags to allow targeted individuals to access certain information on subject matters easily. The hashtag messages elicit conversation among the target group because individuals can use them to make decisions or be informed about a certain product or business information (Yee et al., 2022). In addition, companies can use promotional messages to send notifications to their target groups

directly via notifications. Social media allows companies to provide customized content to each person.

Social Media Marketing

Scholars have conceptualized social media marketing differently. Social media marketing refers to using different social media platforms to allow individuals or companies to connect with their audience to build their brand and income and drive website traffic (Ancillai et al., 2019; Basri & Siam, 2019; Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Social media marketing also refers to utilizing social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook to promote brand names or products (Ali Qalati et al., 2020). Social media marketing is a dynamic approach that allows companies to maintain their profile online; post pictures, videos, and stories of their products; respond to comments; and share and like products. Typically, it is through following engagement and communication that individuals get interested in the company's product or services.

Different factors influence an organization's decision to adopt social media marketing. Maiorescu et al. (2020) identified the need to reduce cost and optimize efficiency as one factor influencing managers' decisions to adopt social media marketing in organizations. Other researchers, such as Ancillai et al. (2019), have also indicated that organizations adopt social media marketing to increase their presence online. Equally, Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) reported that one of the factors influencing the adoption of social media marketing is brand awareness. Companies adopt social media marketing strategies to increase brand awareness and target more customers (Puspaningrum, 2020). Different factors or motives to embrace social media marketing in

SMEs include reducing cost, improving efficiency, improving brand awareness, and promoting customer engagement and satisfaction.

Influence of Social Media on SMEs' Performance

Organizational performance refers to analyzing, assessing, and evaluating a firm's performance against its objectives. Other researchers have indicated that organizational performance refers to the ability of a firm to attain set goals or to optimize results (Gherghina et al., 2020; Haseeb et al., 2019). Organizational performance dictates the extent to which an organization is achieving its goal (Kordab et al., 2020).

There are different types of organizational performance, including financial performance, market performance, and shareholder performance. Financial performance refers to how company policies help an organization remain financially stable. However, market performance measures how a firm's product or services perform. Shareholder value or performance reflects how a company satisfies shareholder interests (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019). In numerous organizations, shareholder performance has become the primary role (Bauman & Lucy, 2020). In this study, the focus was on understanding how social media marketing influences the organizational performance of SMEs in terms of financial performance, customer relations, efficiency, economics, market, and other components of SMEs' performance.

The advent of technology and the development of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have positively and negatively impacted SMEs. In a qualitative study, Kwon et al. (2021) examined the effects of social media on SMEs using data drawn from 210 SMEs operating Facebook and Twitter accounts. The researchers

revealed that social media reduced their marketing costs to SMEs and allowed close customer interaction, increasing sales (Kwon et al., 2021). Similarly, in a global review of 2,682 articles on the impacts of social media on SMEs, Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) found social media to spur the growth and development of SMEs through enhanced marketing, increased sales, and improved competitiveness. With their size and structure, SMEs adopt social media to create knowledge and enhance creativity and innovation to boost performance and competitiveness.

Promotes Brand Awareness in the Market

Social media may help build brand awareness through online advertisement of products and services among SMEs in the United States. Fraccastoro et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the use of social media and traditional communication tools in the sales process and the creation of brand awareness in SMEs in the United States. Social media advertising through diverse social media platforms could assist in building and promoting brand awareness among customers in SMEs in the United States (Utomo et al., 2023). SMEs may use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their products and create product awareness among their customers (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Son and Niehm (2021) conducted a quantitative study to examine social media usage in navigating markets among SME organizations in the United States. In their findings, Son and Niehm (2021) revealed that organizations have opted for social media platforms to enhance their presence in the global market through social media content creation to promote brand awareness. Social

media may help build brand awareness through online advertisement of products and services among SMEs.

Social media could assist in building brand awareness through online advertisement of products and services among SMEs. Dwivedi et al. (2021) investigated social media implementation, usage, and its effect on SMEs. The researchers found that social media is a cutting-edge marketing tool encouraging dynamic, cooperative, and individualized connections with stakeholders and customers (Dwivedi et al., 2021). According to Dwivedi et al. (2021), using social media tools can promote brand awareness of SMEs' products and services. However, the investigators failed to indicate the influence social media may have on SMEs' performance in the United States. Saura et al. (2021) investigated digital marketing and the use of social media platforms for brand awareness. Organizations use social media through digital marketing strategies to sell services and products and build brand awareness (Saura et al., 2021). Social media could assist in building brand awareness among SMEs through online advertisement of products and services.

The use of social media could help build brand awareness through advertising SMEs' products and services on social media platforms. Hsiao et al. (2020) supported this assertion by examining how social media affects the fashion sector and its effect on brand awareness. They found that using social media for marketing products significantly affects building a brand for SMEs in the fashion industry in the United States (Hsiao et al., 2020). Social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, could increase customer product awareness (Hsiao et al., 2020). Yee et al. (2022) also

examined how social media marketing could promote brand loyalty in SME organizations in the United States. Yee et al. reported that social media significantly improves brand satisfaction, brand relationship quality, brand consciousness, and value consciousness as mediators of brand loyalty and fosters long-term customer relationships. However, the researchers did not indicate how social media can affect SMEs' performance.

The articles reviewed revealed differing findings. While Dwivedi et al. (2021) demonstrated that social media is a cutting-edge marketing tool that can encourage dynamic, cooperative, and individualized connections with stakeholders and customers, Saura et al. (2021) reported that social media enhances brand awareness in the United States although failed to indicate how social media could influence SMEs' performance. As a result, Dwivedi et al. (2021) and Saura et al. (2021) consistently suggested that future research should investigate the relationship between social media and SME performance. Social media might help build brand awareness through online advertisement of products and services among SMEs.

Internet marketing helps in creating branding awareness. Klein and Todesco (2021) investigated the relationship between social media marketing and the brand awareness of SMEs. Klein and Todesco (2021) reported that social media marketing increases brand awareness among social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter users. Ur Rahman et al. (2020) also evaluated the effect of internet marketing on the brand awareness of SMEs. Ur Rahman et al. (2020) established that online forums such as YouTube enable SMEs to update on new products in the market and conduct demos on

product usability, increasing brand awareness. Wibowo et al. (2020) recruited 26 SMEs to investigate the effect of internet marketing on brand awareness. Wibowo et al. (2020) revealed that SMEs use social media platforms such as Facebook and Pinterest to create brand awareness through product updates, offering crazy product offers to attract a huge audience and other necessary information. Social media marketing increases the brand awareness of SMEs.

Social media marketing improves the brand awareness of SMEs. Haseeb et al. (2019) examined the influence of social marketing on the brand awareness of SMEs. Haseeb et al. (2019) reported that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have millions of users, enable SMEs to create awareness of their products and services through paid advertising. Maldonado-Erazo et al. (2020) also investigated the link between social media marketing and the brand awareness of SMEs. Maldonado-Erazo et al. (2020) highlighted that social media marketing on platforms such as LinkedIn creates a platform for customers to share good experiences with other peers regarding firms' products and services, which increases brand awareness. Pizzi et al. (2020) evaluated the influence of social media marketing on the brand awareness of SMEs. The researchers established that internet marketing, such as micro-blogging, social networking, and online forums, aids in creating brand awareness for SMEs (Pizzi et al., 2020). Internet marketing enables SMEs to build brand awareness through Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Improves Customer Base in SMEs

Social media use could increase the customer base through online presence among SMEs in the United States. Moy et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to examine social media on innovation, performance, and knowledge production in small and medium-sized businesses. Social media enhanced product knowledge creation and innovation to build brand awareness, thereby increasing the customer base in SMEs (Haseeb et al., 2019). SME organizations may use social media platforms such as Twitter to create product awareness for their customers in the United States. This is similar to Moy et al. (2020) reported by Cheng and Shiu (2019), who examined how to use social media to increase SME consumer interaction. Cheng and Shiu (2019) revealed that organizations using social media platforms enhance their market presence and customer relation management, thereby increasing their customer base. Social media use could increase the customer base through online presence among SMEs.

Social media could assist in enhancing the customer base through the online selling of products and services among SMEs in the United States. Kraus et al. (2019) investigated the resource-constrained methods of social media SMEs for creating marketing content. They demonstrated that social media could create engaging content that can attract customers, thereby increasing SMEs' customer base in the United States. Social media can improve awareness of SMEs' products and services, attracting many customers (Kraus et al., 2019). However, the investigators failed to indicate the influence social media may have on SMEs' performance in the United States. Song et al. (2022) investigated the use of social media to improve supply chain sensing capabilities and

brand awareness in the United States. SMEs' use of social media through digital marketing strategies might increase their customer base. Social media could assist in enhancing the customer base through the online selling of products and services among SMEs.

Although the evidence reviewed indicated the relationship between the customer base and social media usage, some studies showed conflicting results. Moy et al. (2020) opined that social media enhanced product knowledge creation and innovation to build brand awareness, thereby increasing the customer base in SMEs, suggesting further research regarding the influence of social media on SME performance. However, Cheng and Shiu (2019) revealed that organizations using social media platforms enhance their market presence and customer relation management, thereby increasing their customer base. Kraus et al. (2019) and Song et al. (2022) concurred that social media use increases the customer base among SMEs in the United States. While Song et al. (2022) extended earlier findings, the researchers did not generalize the findings with a diverse sample size. In addition, the researchers used only one geographical location and investigated the relationship between the customer base and social media from a general perspective. The researchers advocated additional research using diverse populations and locations to generalize the findings. The use of social media may increase the customer base.

Several researchers have shown interest in understanding the effect of social media marketing on retargeting opportunities and overall business performance among SMEs. Heider et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between social media marketing and retargeting of business opportunities. They found that social media platforms such as

Facebook adverts allow customized campaigns to attract the required audience, improving overall business performance. Witschel et al. (2019) also examined how social media marketing enhances retargeting opportunities in SMEs to improve business performance. Witschel et al. (2019) established that social media marketers could target those who view the company's website with specific product inquiries through specialized ads, increasing SMEs' business performance. Clauss et al. (2022) conducted a cross-sectional study to evaluate how social media marketing helps retarget opportunities in SMEs. Clauss et al. (2022) underscored that social media marketing increases brand loyalty, thus making it easy to increase audience target for more opportunities, increasing business performance in SMEs. Social media marketing, such as Facebook adverts, enables SMEs to retarget opportunities to the right audience.

Social media marketing enables SMEs to retarget opportunities. Clauß et al. (2020) conducted a systematic literature review to examine how social media marketing leads to retargeting opportunities in SMEs. Obermayer et al. (2022) established that social media marketing, such as Snapchat, helps retarget opportunities by creating traffic to the organization's website, increasing sales and overall business performance in SMEs. Prasanna et al. (2019) reported that social media marketing response enables SMEs to evaluate performance and retarget opportunities to the audience that can improve the overall performance of the firms. Social media marketing platforms such as Twitter and Facebook enhance the retargeting of opportunities to a broader geographical coverage through paid campaigns, resulting in increased sales and better SME performance.

Altogether, social media marketing enables SMEs to evaluate their performance and retarget their opportunities to the right audience.

Improved Access to Information

Social media platforms have increased SMEs' access to information that has helped improve their performance (Fraccastoro et al., 2021; Humphries et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2021). Fraccastoro et al. (2021) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 managers and supervisors of 10 SMEs in the United States. They found that social media platforms enhanced their access to marketing information on a large scale. Posting information about a product in the market and then analyzing the comments and suggestions given by potential customers allowed SMEs to collect information on how to better their marketing strategies (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Mason et al. (2021) reported similar findings by analyzing survey data collected from 327 consumers and SMEs in the United States. Mason et al. (2021) also found that social media enhanced their access to information and helped them tailor their marketing strategy to reach many customers. With access to information, SMEs improved their marketing strategies and competitiveness.

Information on market operations and size helped SMEs develop strategies to increase brand awareness and areas of operations. Humphries et al. (2020) analyzed survey data from more than 8,000 SMEs in the United States to report on the effects of COVID-19 and the CARES Act on SME operations. The researchers found that besides social media helping SMEs learn and apply for government assistance programs, it helped them keep track of and understand how COVID-19 transformed consumer tastes.

Through platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, it was easy for SMEs to recalibrate their marketing strategy to appeal to potential customers while enhancing awareness of their brands. Humphries et al. (2020) established that when compared to large businesses, SMEs' digital capacity was less developed and thus limited the information they could gather and use as a base for government support programs and market expansion. Humphries et al. (2020) suggested more research on how SMEs used social media marketing information to enhance their competitiveness and improve brand awareness and profits.

Amoah & Jibril (2021) reported comparable results when investigating social media as a promotional tool for SMEs in developed and developing economies. Amoah and Jibril (2021) reported that SMEs retrieved critical information on consumer likes and dislikes through social media, enhancing their marketing strategy and attracting more customers. Teasing (2021) analyzed quantitative data collected from 13,000 SMEs in the United Kingdom and the United States; social media networking for rural and urban SMEs enhanced their performance and customer base through improved marketing. Belás et al. (2021), in a quantitative study with 1,520 SME respondents in the United States, reiterated that though many SMEs failed to appreciate the significance of social media, the information obtained about customers and market performance helped the SMEs market their brands and increased their customer base. There is, however, a gap in the literature on how SMEs manage their marketing and customer information on social media platforms.

In the initial review, researchers demonstrated that social media increased SMEs' access to marketing and customer information (Lepkowska-White & Parsons, 2019). Access to such critical information enhanced their brand awareness and presence in the larger global, regional, and local markets (Mason et al., 2021). Despite the benefits of social media in providing SMEs with information that enhances their performance and competitiveness, there is limited literature on the same, as evidenced by Belás et al. (2021) and Humphries et al. (2020). Therefore, this study will address this gap by providing the most recent information on how SMEs in the United States have used social media for marketing and as sources of marketing information.

Improved Customer Relations

SMEs have used social to cultivate and improve their customer relations and interactions. Mason et al. (2021) qualitatively investigated the role of social media in enhancing SME relationships with their customers. Researcher found that SMEs used social media to influence new customers, mobilize the actions of others toward the brand, and generate positive content from customer reviews (Salam et al., 2021). However, the failure of SMEs to use the information generated by social media platforms for strategic decision making influenced their performance negatively.

Li and Xie (2019) found that through Facebook and Twitter, SMEs used content and images to engage with their customers, increasing brand awareness and sales. Therefore, through social media, SMEs maintain contact with and actively engage with their customers, increasing sales and brand awareness (Mason et al., 2021). COVID-19 disrupted the business environment, and with the unprecedented closure of SMEs, those

that survived digitized their operations and used social media to strengthen their relationship with customers and improve their interactions. Chu et al. (2020) compared consumer engagement in the United States and China with 482 SMEs using social media platforms. The researchers reported that SMEs' effective use of social media positively influenced customer attitudes and facilitated positive interaction with SMEs. Mason et al. (2021) revealed that during COVID-19, SMEs used social media platforms to interact and relate with their customers. Using Facebook and Twitter to interact with customers during lockdown helped SMEs maintain relationships with their customers and even attract new ones. Klein and Todesco (2021) reviewed nine articles and established that during COVID-19, SMEs adopted digital platforms such as Facebook to facilitate operations and maintain relationships with potential customers. When used correctly, social media platforms enhance the quality of relationships between SMEs and their employees.

Despite the positive outcomes of social media in enhancing SMEs' interaction with their customers, Klein and Todesco (2021) found that a lack of resources and a clear data management plan interfered with the quality of relationships and frequency of interaction between SMEs and potential customers. Comparably, Salam et al. (2021) established that though SMEs used social media to provide customers with specific information about their wineries, lacking a clear purpose for adopting social media and the inability to tailor the social media platforms to meet the needs of customers limited its application and influence on customer relations management. Most of the data analyzed in the preceding reviews are self-reported and may be inaccurate regarding SME and

customer interaction. Therefore, this study will not only address the gap concerning the availability of literature but also address the limitation associated with the lack of a clear purpose for using social media and using self-reported responses due to the effects of COVID-19.

Internet marketing improves customer service delivery. Mio et al. (2020) investigated the impact of social media on customer service delivery by SMEs. Mio et al. (2020) reported that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable customers to ask questions and get responses faster, which improves customer service delivery. Kitsios et al. (2020) also examined the effect of social media marketing on customer service delivery in SMEs. They highlighted that social platforms such as live chats provide better customer service delivery because of immediate feedback on customer needs. Surya et al. (2021) also conducted a meta-analysis study to evaluate the link between social media marketing and customer service in SMEs. Surya et al. (2021) reported that internet marketing, such as YouTube streaming, allows businesses to interact with customers in real time, which increases customer service in SMEs. Based on the evidence reviewed thus far, social marketing enables SMEs to interact with customers in real time, improving customer service delivery and performance.

Social media platforms improve customer service delivery in SMEs. Al-Jinini et al. (2019) examined the link between social media marketing and customer service in SMEs. Al-Jinini et al. (2019) established that social media platforms allow businesses to get customer reviews, enabling them to improve customer service, thus improving business performance. Gherghina et al. (2020) also evaluated the influence of social

media marketing on customer service delivery and overall business performance.

Gherghina et al. (2020) highlighted that social media marketing, such as micro-blogging and sharing, improves customer service delivery because the target audience can get the required information in real time. Effendi et al. (2020) also conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the impact of social media marketing on customer service. Effendi et al. (2020) revealed that social media marketing enables marketers to engage with prospective customers, increasing customer service and improving business performance among SMEs. Social media marketing improves customer service delivery and overall business performance in SMEs.

Enhances Communication Between SMEs and Customers

SMEs have increasingly used social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to communicate with customers. Klein and Todesco (2021) investigated the influence of social media on SMEs' communication using a sample of 515 small businesses in the United States. The researchers reported that small businesses used Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn to communicate with customers about their new products or branches. Similarly, Akpan et al. (2020) studied 317 SMEs in the United States and how they used social media to enhance customer involvement. Despite the scarcity of literature, Akpan et al. (2020) found social media platforms to enhance SMEs-customer relations and communication, enhancing sales. Lepkowska-White and Parsons (2019) investigated social media marketing using a sample of 14 managers in small restaurants in the United States. The researchers reported that social media platforms facilitated communication between customers and restaurants, improving sales and

service quality. Social media promotes communication between SMEs and their customers.

Customers are also using social media platforms to communicate with owners of SME businesses. As Akpan et al. (2020) illustrated, Facebook, Twitter, and Messenger were easy and cheap social media platforms that customers used to seek clarification about a product, inquire about new products, or make purchases. Salam et al. (2021) reiterated that through social media, constant interaction and communication between SMEs and their customers helped SMEs provide customer-specific and customer-oriented services, enhancing their overall profits and customer satisfaction. Lepkowska-White et al. (2019), however, argued that the failure of SMEs to update their contact information on the sites and creatively use the social media platform decreased customer interaction and communication. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, provide the easiest communication and interaction platform for SMEs and their customers.

Social media platforms have helped improve corporate social communication between SMEs. Akpan et al. (2020) used data drawn from 449 respondents in the United States and the United Kingdom to examine the influence of social media on communication between SMEs and that SMEs used social media to manage and sustain business-to-business interactions. Salam et al. (2021) quantitatively investigated the impact of social media on customer relationships and the performance of SMEs using two empirical studies with samples of 181 respondents from energy solutions companies and 375 sales representatives from 1200 SMEs. The researchers revealed that social media increased communication between sales representatives and potential customers,

increasing sales through interactive discussions. However, poor use of social media due to poor training on social media influenced communication negatively (Hsiao et al., 2020). Thus, social media increases communication and SMEs' sales with potential customers.

Social media platforms enhanced communication between SMEs and their customers during the Covid-19 lockdown. Akpan et al. (2020) investigated the impacts of Covid-19 and the adoption of state-of-the-art technology and social media during Covid-19. In the literature review, adopting state-of-the-art technologies and social media improved interaction between SMEs and their customers, promoting innovation and creativity, and enhancing sales. Consistent results were reported by Salam et al. (2021), who used a sample of 149 retailers to investigate their perception of using social media for marketing and communication during COVID-19. Salam et al. (2021) found that SMEs' adoption of social media in the United States was influenced by their knowledge and experience with social media marketing. For SMEs with expertise and knowledge, social media enhanced their sales through increased communication and interaction with potential customers during COVID-19. Therefore, during COVID-19, social media platforms, including Facebook, enhanced SME communication with customers and partners.

With technology and social media platforms giving SMEs a competitive chance against established businesses, there is a need for future researchers to investigate and recommend strategies that SMEs can use to adopt, implement, and use technology in their operations. Hinson et al. (2019) found that while social media facilitated

communication between SME businesses, the levels and quality of B2B interactions via social media were diminished, and so were the sales. Poor use of social media platforms hinders communication and the SME's ability to achieve its objectives (Lepkowska-White et al., 2019). Akpan et al. (2020) suggested the need for research to examine SMEs' strategies to overcome the challenges of adopting and using social media and other technologies. Therefore, this study will address this gap in the literature by providing recommendations on some of the strategies SMEs can use to enhance their use of technology, especially social media, in marketing and communication with other SMEs and customers.

Market Share and Sales/Revenue

Additionally, social media may expand the customer base, increasing sales and revenue among SMEs in the United States. Lupo and Stroman (2020) conducted a quantitative study to examine the use of social media and marketing adoption strategies in SMEs. They found that innovative social media advertising activities increase the viability and customer base, resulting in increased sales and revenue among SMEs in the United States. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter could promote products and create product awareness among the target customers, thus increasing sales volume and revenue. Similar findings to those of Lupo and Stroman (2020) were reported by Kwon et al. (2021), who conducted a quantitative study to examine social media use for brand awareness in markets among SME organizations in the United States. Kwon et al. (2021) revealed that social media platforms promote customer awareness of the

organizations' products, enhancing sales and revenue. Social media may expand the customer base, increasing sales and revenue among SMEs.

Expanding the customer base through social media platforms could increase sales and revenue among SMEs in the United States. Cheng and Shiu (2019) investigated how to use social media to increase consumer interaction for SMEs in the United States. The researchers established that social media-based customer involvement provides a cutting-edge marketing tool that can encourage customers to buy the organization's products and services, thereby increasing sales and revenue in SMEs (Cheng & Shiu, 2019). However, the researchers have not indicated how social media influences SME performance.

Neilson and Gibson (2022) investigated social media platforms and brand awareness. They revealed that using social media increases customer base and market share, thus leading to increased sales and revenue among SMEs. Thus far, expanding the customer base through social media platforms could increase sales and revenue among SMEs.

The use of social media may expand the customer base through social media platforms, which could increase sales and revenue among SMEs. Hanell et al. (2020) supported this assertion by examining social media's effects on brand awareness. They found that using social media increases SME market presence and customer base, thereby enhancing sales and revenue for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the United States (Hanell et al., 2020). Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter increase customer product awareness, thus increasing sales volume and revenue (Hanell et al., 2020). Li et al. (2021) examined social media marketing strategy and brand loyalty in SME organizations. Li et al. (2021) reported that social media

significantly improves brand satisfaction and brand relationship quality, fostering long-term customer relationships and resulting in high sales volumes and revenue. However, the researcher did not demonstrate how social media can affect SMEs' performance.

Studies have indicated that the use of social media may expand the customer base through social media platforms, resulting in increased sales and revenue among SMEs.

Social media may assist in increasing market share through the online presence of products and services among SMEs. Males and Cherry (2021) analyzed the market share of digital and social media marketing in SMEs in the United States construction industry. They found that digital and social media marketing through diverse social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, increases the market share of SMEs, thereby resulting in increased sales and revenue in SMEs (Dekimpe et al., 2020). SMEs may use social media platforms to promote their products and create engaging content, resulting in more customers and increased sales volume (Males & Cherry, 2021). Susanto et al. (2021) analyzed creating a marketing strategy with social media and its wearables among SME organizations in the United States. Susanto et al. (2021) revealed that organizations' use of social media promotes their presence in the market through content creation to promote brand awareness, thereby increasing customer base, sales volume, and revenue. Social media may assist in increasing market share through the online presence of products and services among SMEs.

Increased market share can be enhanced through social media, increasing sales and revenue among SMEs. Maiorescu et al. (2020) investigated social media implementation, usage, and its effect on SME organizations in the United States. They

found that social media could encourage dynamic customers, attract new customers, and promote support services to current customers, increasing market share, sales, and revenue. However, they did not highlight the influence social media could have on SMEs' performance. Tolstoy et al. (2021) investigated digital marketing and the use of social media platforms to increase brand awareness in the United States. They found that social media promotes customer presence and loyalty to an organization's products through constant communication and feedback, thereby increasing sales and revenue for SMEs. The increased market share can be enhanced through social media, increasing sales and revenue among SMEs.

The market share of SMEs can be increased through social media presence, thereby resulting in increased sales and revenue among SMEs in the United States. Saleem et al. (2021) investigated how social media affected the fashion sector and its effect on brand awareness. They revealed that using social media for marketing products significantly affects building a brand for small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the fashion industry (Saleem et al., 2021). Social media use among SMEs could increase product awareness among customers, thereby increasing SMEs' market share, sales volume, and revenue (Saleem et al., 2021). Yee et al. (2022) also conceptualized how social media marketing could promote brand loyalty, increasing market share, sales volume, and total revenue in SMEs in the United States. Yee et al. (2022) reported that social media improves customer satisfaction through feedback provision. However, the research did not demonstrate how social media can affect SMEs' performance.

In this regard, Saleem et al. (2021) recommended additional research to investigate how social media may influence performance among SMEs in the United States. Whereas Males and Cherry (2021) indicated that digital and social media marketing through diverse social media platforms increases the market share of SMEs, Maiorescu et al. (2020) demonstrated that social media could be used to encourage dynamic customers, attract new customers, and promote support services to the current customer thereby increasing market share, sales, and revenue. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended further research on the impact of social media on SME performance because the reviewed articles are limited in indicating how social media influences SMEs' performance.

Small and medium businesses have used social media platforms to increase brand awareness. Using a mixed-methods research methodology, Hsiao et al. (2020) examined how social media influenced brand awareness for Scottish and American SMEs. The researchers reported that social media enhanced the real-time acquisition and sharing of knowledge and information about a product to potential customers (Hsiao et al., 2020). Aggressive and creative marketing increased brand and SME awareness among existing and new customers. Eid et al. (2019) reported similar findings and investigated the consequences of social media marketing on United States' B2B export SMEs. Collecting and analyzing data from 277 B2B export SMEs revealed that social media enhanced the awareness of the products being sold by the SMEs. Therefore, quality international and local contacts through social media increase SMEs' understanding of customer preferences, brand awareness, and, consequently, market share due to sales.

There is limited literature regarding social media and brand awareness for SMEs. However, literature published in other countries has demonstrated a positive relationship between social media use, brand awareness, and increased market share for business-to-business SMEs. Ancillai et al. (2019) investigated social media use and SMEs in South East England. The policy changes and theoretical analysis of the non-experimental data drawn from 125 SMEs revealed that social media enhanced brand awareness and sales. Similarly, Hsiao et al. (2020) investigated how social media influenced the fashion industry in five countries, including the United States. Collecting and using regression analysis to analyze the 1395 posts retrieved revealed that combining national brands with private fashion brands in the Lookbook posts increased the brands' popularity, awareness, and sales.

There is a relationship between brand awareness, social media marketing, and increased market share through sales. Extending the research conducted by Hsiao et al. (2020), Males and Cherry (2021) investigated the use of technology by SMEs in the construction industry. It found that social media increased their digital marketing capabilities and broader access to the construction market. Further, Males and Cherry found that though digital marketing enhanced sales through brand awareness, many SMEs lacked the operational knowledge, resources, and training to use social media to increase brand awareness, sales, and market share. Identifying the effects of external factors on the uptake and use of social marketing will help overcome the challenges SMEs face besides boosting sales. Across the reviewed literature, researchers have

demonstrated a positive relationship between brand awareness, social media marketing, and increased market share through sales.

There is, however, a need to improve digital awareness and use among SMEs to increase outcomes. Similarly, Ancillai et al. (2019) and Hsiao et al. (2020) revealed that increased brand popularity translated to increased brand awareness and sales. However, Hsiao et al. (2020) argued that social media increased brand awareness but did not necessarily reflect increased sales and market share. Secondary data and methodological limitations negatively impacted the reviewed literature examining social media use by SMEs and market sales and shares. This study will address the challenges associated with using secondary data by advocating for collecting and analyzing primary data and adding new literature on the impacts of social media on SMEs' market share.

Social media marketing could increase the revenue of SMEs. Bartolacci et al. (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study to examine the effect of social media marketing on the business performance of SMEs. The researchers established that social media platforms such as Instagram assist in getting people to know more about the business, increasing the customer base, and increasing revenue for SMEs. Hinson et al. (2019) investigated the influence of social media marketing on the business performance of SMEs. Lupo and Stroman (2020) highlighted that social media marketing through LinkedIn and Twitter enables SMEs to reach the target audience interested in the firm's products and services, increasing revenue. Contradicting Bartolacci et al. (2020), Matarazzo et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review to examine the link between social media marketing and the revenue of SMEs. Matarazzo et al. (2021)

reported that social media such as Facebook might negatively affect organizations' performance due to the false representation of dissatisfied customers who use social media to rant and complain about poor services and products they received from the organization. Although some studies have revealed an insignificant relationship between revenue and social media marketing, several studies demonstrate that social media increases the revenue of SMEs.

Social media marketing improves the business performance of SMEs. Moy et al. (2020) reported that social media users could recommend a product to their friends, who may purchase the product, increasing SMEs' revenue. Hanaysha et al. (2022) also investigated the relationship between social media marketing and the revenue generation of SMEs. Hanaysha et al. (2022) revealed that online events and content help get customer leads, increasing revenue for SMEs. Gherghina et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study to evaluate the effect of social media marketing on SMEs' revenue generation. The researcher reported that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter enable customers to book appointments, buy products, and share reviews on product quality, increasing SMEs' revenue. Combining the evidence reviewed thus far, one can conclude that social media marketing increases the revenue of SMEs.

Customer Attraction and Satisfaction

Small and medium businesses have employed technology to attract new customers. Hinson et al. (2019) investigated the consequences of SMEs' customer engagement using Facebook and revealed that the creative use of Facebook increased customer attachment to the brand. Their positive engagement and content on the product

did attract new customers and enhanced customer engagement. Hsiao et al. (2020), while investigating how social media was shaping the SME fashion industry, revealed that combining private labels and national brands increased brand awareness and customer engagement. Supporting the findings of Hsiao et al. (2020), Nafees et al. (2021) investigated the impacts of consumer brand influencers on influencing consumer attitudes. Analyzing data from 231 U.S. Instagram users, the findings indicated that brand influencers positively affected consumer choice of products. Moreover, through their influence, brand influencers positively influenced the attitudes of both new and existing customers. Despite limited literature, there is a positive relationship between SMEs' use of social media and their ability to attract new customers.

Social media use by SMEs has also been associated with increased customer satisfaction. Ancillai et al. (2019) revealed that creative use of social media to ensure the consumption of accurate information, active engagement with customers, and generating content that responds to the needs of consumers increased customer satisfaction. Zhang et al. (2020) investigated how established and SME information technology companies used Twitter. Although established information technology companies managed active Twitter accounts, SMEs with active accounts shared critical marketing, corporate, and technical information and reported a more satisfied customer base. Gligor and Bozkurt (2021) reported consistent results investigating the effects of social media agility on customer engagement and satisfaction. Data from 200 participants revealed that social media agility positively and negatively enhanced customer-based brand equity associated with high customer satisfaction. Customers who are satisfied with a particular brand actively

engage with the manufacturer through social media and generate comments that may attract new customers.

Preceding literature on the influence of social media platforms on SMEs' customer attraction and satisfaction reveals a positive. Hinson et al. (2019) and Hsiao et al. (2020) found that social media use by SMEs increased customer engagement, and user-generated content was employed to attract new customers. Ancillai et al. (2019) concurred with Zhang et al. (2020) that SMEs used social media to meet the informational needs of their customers. Despite the positive outcomes of social media use, secondary data, self-reported questionnaires, and methodological limitations influenced the outcome of reviewed studies. Furthermore, literature on SMEs' social media use, customer satisfaction, and attraction is scarce. Therefore, this study, in addition to addressing the limitations of existing studies, will add literature on how social media influences SMEs' ability to attract new customers and satisfy existing customers by meeting their various informational needs.

Social Media Helps SMEs Connect with Current Customers

Constant feedback through social media may help create customer loyalty among SMEs. Ali Qalati et al. (2020) analyzed the factors influencing SME success and how social media adoption acts as a mediator in the United States. The researchers found that social media could provide customer feedback and advertise different products and services in SMEs (Ali Qalati et al., 2020). SMEs may use social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to market their products to their target customers and enhance communication with customers in the United States (Ali Qalati et al., 2020). Basri and

Siam (2019) conducted a quantitative study investigating social media and corporate communication antecedents of SME sustainability performance. They reported that social media platforms might enhance product presence, offer after-sale customer support, and enhance SMEs' presence in the global market through social media content creation. Constant feedback through social media may help create customer loyalty among SMEs.

Prior studies demonstrated that social media usage among SMEs could assist in sharing feedback with customers to increase customer loyalty, resulting in an increased customer base. Ancillai et al. (2019) investigated social media usage and driven sales volume in SME organizations. They established that social media could be used as a marketing tool to promote company products and services through advertisement and sales promotions, such as creating appealing content and products to attract potential customers (Ancillai et al. (2019). However, social media does not influence SMEs' performance in the United States (Ancillai et al., 2019). Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) investigated digital marketing and social media marketing management: an application to small restaurants in the United States. Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) demonstrated that adopting social media could promote company products, resulting in increased sales volume and revenue, leading to positive performance among SMEs in the United States. Social media usage among SMEs could assist in sharing feedback with customers to increase customer loyalty, resulting in an increased customer base.

The findings presented by several studies reviewed above have failed to indicate social media's influence on SMEs' performance in the United States. While Ali Qalati et al. (2020) opined that social media could be used to provide feedback to customers as

well as advertise different products and services, Basri and Siam (2019) reported that social media platforms could be used to enhance product presence, offer after sale support to customers and enhance SMEs' presence in the global market through social media content creation. However, the researchers did not discuss the effect of social media, such as Facebook, on the performance of SMEs in the United States. Ancillai et al. (2019) established social media as a marketing tool to promote company products and services. Nevertheless, the researchers did not reveal how the promotion of products and services could affect SMEs' performance. Ancillai et al. (2019) recommended further studies to research the effect of social media platforms on companies' overall performance in the United States. Lepkowska-White et al. (2019) also suggested additional research to investigate the influence of social media on SMEs' performance.

Brand awareness through social media could help attract and retain customers among SMEs. Males and Cherry (2021) investigated the growing digital and social media marketing market share for construction SMEs in the United States. They found that social media marketing through diverse social media platforms such as Facebook could help create brand awareness for SMEs to their target customers. Comparable findings were reported by Makrides et al. (2020), who conducted a quantitative study to examine social media usage and digital marketing among SME organizations in the United States. Makrides et al. (2020) opined that organizations have opted for social media platforms to promote their online presence through social media content creation, thereby increasing market share. Given the findings, it is evident that creating brand awareness through social media could help attract and retain customers among SMEs in the United States.

In earlier research, social media may assist in creating brand awareness to attract and keep customers among SMEs in the United States. Fraccastoro et al. (2021) investigated the B2B sales process of multinational SMEs' combined use of social media platforms and traditional communication methods in the United States. The researchers found that social media assists in creating brand awareness among customers of SMEs, thereby resulting in increased online presence, sales, and revenue (Fraccastoro et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the investigators failed to designate the effect social media might have on SMEs' performance. Bauman and Lucy (2020) investigated digital marketing and the use of social media platforms to increase brand awareness in the United States. The investigators demonstrated that social media platforms could be used as digital marketing strategies to promote services and products and create brand awareness among SMEs in the United States. Given the findings, building brand awareness through social media could help attract and retain customers among SMEs.

Social media may not influence firm performance. While Bauman and Lucy (2020) extended previous results, the investigators did not use a diverse sample size to generalize the findings. In addition, they used one geographical setting and examined the relationship between creating brand awareness and social media from a general perspective (Bauman & Lucy, 2020). In this regard, Bauman and Lucy (2020) suggested additional research using diverse sample sizes with unique characteristics such as gender and different locations to generalize the findings. Though some researchers indicated differing results, Males and Cherry (2021) reported that social media marketing through diverse social media platforms such as Facebook could help create brand awareness for

SMEs to their target customers in the United States. However, the findings contradict Fraccastoro et al. (2021), stating that social media assists in creating brand awareness among customers of SMEs, thereby resulting in increased online presence, sales, and revenue. Some researchers have failed to establish a direct influence of social media on performance.

Social media platforms have successfully broken down barriers between companies and their customers by providing after-sale services among SMEs in the United States. Walton (2022) examined emerging economies and global SMEs driven by digital platforms as entrepreneurial ecosystems. He found that social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, have successfully broken down barriers between companies and their customers by providing after-sale service, promotion of products, and digital marketing of new products to customers among SMEs in the United States. Dwivedi et al. (2021) also conducted a quantitative study to examine social media adoption in navigating markets among SMEs. Dwivedi et al. (2021) revealed that organizations that use digital marketing tools through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have promoted effective and efficient communication with their customers. Social media platforms have successfully broken down barriers between companies and their customers by providing after-sale services among SMEs in the United States.

The use of social media among SMEs promotes effective communication between organizations and their customers, thereby increasing the customer and market base in the United States. Dwivedi et al. (2021) investigated social media implementation, usage,

and its effect on SME organizations. They found that social media as a marketing tool could attract customers, communicate with customers, offer support, and enhance individualized connections with stakeholders and customers to improve sales and revenue volumes in SME organizations. However, the researcher failed to indicate the relationship between social media and SME performance in the United States. Saura et al. (2021) also investigated digital marketing and the use of social media platforms to increase brand awareness in the United States. They established that organizations' use of social media through digital marketing strategies, such as sales promotions and advertisement of new products, enhances an increased customer base among SMEs. The use of social media among SMEs promotes effective communication between organizations and their customers, thereby increasing the customer and market base in the United States.

Earlier researchers revealed that social media promotes constant communication between customers and organizations, thus ensuring customer loyalty in the United States. As an illustration, Hsiao et al. (2020) conceptualized social media effects on brand awareness and customer feedback in the United States. The researchers found that using social media promotes customer communication, feedback, and marketing of new products, thus increasing market share and customer base among SME organizations in the United States (Hsiao et al., 2020). (Hsiao et al., 2020). Yee et al. (2022) also examined how social media marketing could promote brand loyalty in SME organizations in the United States. Yee et al. (2022) reported that through after-sale services, social media platforms have successfully removed barriers between businesses

and their customers by enhancing effective communication and feedback, thereby increasing customer loyalty (Yee et al., 2022). However, the researcher did not indicate how social media can affect SMEs' performance. Thus far, from the evidence reviewed, social media promotes constant communication between customers and organizations, ensuring customer loyalty in the United States.

Transition

The general business problem was that some owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States have not embraced social media marketing to improve brand awareness, resulting in low brand visibility. The specific business problem is that some owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States lack strategies for using social media to increase brand awareness. Therefore, this qualitative descriptive study aims to explore how SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use social media to increase brand awareness. A purposeful sample of 8 owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States who have used social media marketing to promote their businesses for at least six months were recruited. Data collection was through semi-structured interviews. The next section presents a detailed description of the study design.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

In Section 3, I describe the plan for the project in detail. First, the purpose statement provided in Section 1 is repeated. Next, I discuss project ethics, including the role of the researcher followed by a description of the study participants and the research method and design. In this section, I discuss the study population and sampling, descriptions of the data collection, data organization, data analysis, and validity and reliability procedures.

This qualitative descriptive study was conducted to explore the social media strategies used by SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. This study is significant because it could provide SME owners and managers with insights into the impact of their social media marketing initiatives. The findings of this study could provide insights into the influence of social media marketing strategies adopted by SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States and yield recommendations that might help SME owners improve their strategies.

Project Ethics

I am the primary instrument for the study. According to Peterson (2019), the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis. The researcher will recruit participants after institutional review board (IRB) approval is received, schedule interviews with participants, conduct the interviews, transcribe the data, and analyze the data. Nonetheless, a researcher's role in qualitative research may contribute to researcher bias, which has the potential to threaten the conformability of the findings.

To minimize the potential for researcher bias to threaten the conformability of the findings, I engaged in bracketing during data collection, data analysis, and reporting of the study results (see Alam, 2021). First, I engaged in a process of reflection to become aware of any biases or preconceptions about the study topic, the study itself, the participants, or the expected findings. Handwritten notes were made about any potential biases I became aware of. During data collection, data analysis, and reporting of the findings, I worked to mindfully suspend those potential biases. I repeatedly reflected on becoming aware of any new biases or preconceptions that might arise, and any new potential biases were added to the handwritten notes. The notes were reviewed before I engaged in any data collection, data analysis, or reporting of the results to facilitate the mitigation of biases through mindful efforts to suspend them.

The ethical treatment of human subjects is ensured by meeting the three standards for ethical research described in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 1979). The first standard is respect for persons, which is upheld by ensuring that the autonomy of participants and potential participants is not impeded (DHHS, 1979). Respect for persons was ensured in this study in part by obtaining approval from Walden University's IRB to ensure that the planned protections for human participants are adequate. Respect for persons was also ensured through the informed consent process. During the preliminary phone call, business owners who expressed an interest in the study and confirmed their participation eligibility were invited to review the informed consent form. The terms of informed consent included the entirely voluntary nature of the study, that declining to participate resulted in no negative

consequences and that a participant who joined the study could withdraw at any time by emailing me a message that reads “I withdraw,” without any negative consequences.

Participants also had the right to decline to answer any interview question. In addition, participants were informed of the purpose and nature of the study, both in the recruitment email and during the informed consent process, to ensure they made an informed decision about whether to participate. While reviewing the informed consent with a potential participant, I asked the individual to summarize the terms of informed consent to ensure understanding, and the individual was invited to ask questions and express any concerns. Once questions or concerns were addressed, potential participants could provide informed consent by signing and returning the informed consent form. No data were collected from individuals who did not provide informed consent. The exclusion criteria in this study indicated that no one under the age of 18 years was recruited and that no one with a preexisting relationship with the researcher was recruited. These criteria were determined as means of ensuring that participants could provide informed consent and could do so without conflicts of interests or the influence of an excessive power differential between researcher and subject.

The second standard in the Belmont Report is beneficence, which is ensured by upholding the interests of the research participants (DHHS, 1979). There were no direct incentives to participants in this research. There were also no significant risks, meaning that participating did not exceed the risks participants encountered during their normal day-to-day affairs. Any risk that participants may face due to the possibility of identity disclosure was mitigated through procedures to ensure that participants’ identities would

be kept confidential or known only to the researcher. First, all study materials replaced each participant's real name with an alphanumeric code (P1, P2, etc.). Audio-recorded interview data were deidentified when transcribed by removing any personally identifiable information, including the names, locations, and distinguishing characteristics of the participants' businesses.

The audio recordings of the interviews and the signed informed consent forms are stored on a password-protected flash drive accessible only to the researcher. The flash drive is stored in a locked filing cabinet in an office accessible only to the researcher. The participants' alphanumeric codes are associated with personally identifiable information only in the filenames of the audio recordings of the interviews and the signed informed consent forms on this flash drive. The flash drive will be reformatted and physically destroyed at the end of the required 5-year retention period.

The third standard in the Belmont Report is justice, which refers to the equitable distribution of the risks and benefits of a study (DHHS, 1979). As stated previously, no significant risks were associated with participation in this study. There were also no direct benefits to the participants. However, findings in this study may benefit members of the target population by leading to insights and improved guidelines for using social media marketing to improve the performance of SMEs in convenience stores and other markets. When potential study benefits are returned to the target population, and when there are no significant risks to be borne, the justice standard is satisfied.

Nature of the Project

This study was qualitative. Qualitative research typically involves an open-ended collection of verbal data grounded in the perspectives and contexts of the sources they are derived from (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selection of a qualitative research approach meant that the data and findings were grounded in, or most credible concerning, a sample of SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States. The open-ended nature of data collection meant that participants were invited to express, in their own words, their perceptions and experiences of how social media marketing has influenced their businesses' performance, along with their perceptions of how individual, social, and organizational contexts affect that influence. Qualitative research is an appropriate approach for studying phenomena that cannot easily be separated from the individual, social, or organizational contexts in which they occur (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). SME owners' use of social media marketing and the effects on the performance of their convenience store businesses were expected to be highly context dependent. A qualitative approach, therefore, was appropriate.

Quantitative and mixed methods approaches were considered for this study but were not selected. Quantitative research, including mixed methods research, typically involves calculating statistical relationships such as correlation and causation among variables that can be expressed numerically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A primary strength of quantitative research is that administering a validated survey instrument to a sufficiently large, random sample can yield generalizable results from the study sample to the study population, thereby increasing the relevance of the study results. However,

gathering data that can be expressed numerically requires decontextualizing quantitative data. The phenomenon of interest in this study may be highly dependent on contextual factors, such as local markets, the performance and reputations of specific businesses, and specific social media strategies. For this reason, a research approach yielding decontextualized data would not be appropriate. Therefore, I selected a qualitative methodological approach.

I used a descriptive design in this study. Qualitative descriptive research typically involves collecting semistructured interview data from a purposeful sample of participants (Sandelowski, 2010). A qualitative descriptive design was appropriate for this study because it enables a researcher to focus on an external, real-world phenomena, such as social media marketing use, as the participants in the study perceive and experience the phenomena (Percy et al., 2015).

Grounded theory and phenomenological designs were also considered but excluded. A grounded theory design enables researchers to generate a theory of a phenomenon grounded in the experiences of persons familiar with the phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory research is appropriate when existing theories and models do not sufficiently account for the investigated phenomenon (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers use grounded theory design to identify and construct a theory from data. In this study, I did not construct any theory; hence, the grounded theory design was inappropriate.

Phenomenological researchers focus on the universal essence of a phenomenon. A phenomenological design is focused on understanding lived experiences (Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). However, in a phenomenological design, the focus is on exploring and describing the structure of the internal, subjective component of an experience rather than on describing the external, real-world conditions of that experience. Therefore, a phenomenological design was inappropriate for this study.

In this study, the focus was not on the experience of using social media marketing to promote an SME but rather on real-world strategies and their perceived effects. Therefore, the focus of data collection and analysis needed to be on external, real-world phenomena as the study participants perceive and describe them, rather than on the internal, subjective components of the experience. A phenomenological design would, therefore, have been inappropriate, and a descriptive design was selected instead.

Data saturation occurs when a researcher has collected sufficient data to make quality conclusions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). To ensure data saturation in this study, I used a sample size of eight participants interrogated thoroughly until no new data were collected. Data saturation played a crucial role in enhancing the credibility of the research findings.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

I recruited a sample of eight participants, which is consistent with the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2013). The final sample size was determined when data saturation was achieved. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection and analysis cease to yield new themes and insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The inclusion criteria for the sample were the following: (a) SME owners, (b) in the convenience store market, (c) in the Midwestern United States, (d) for at least 2 years, (e)

who used social media marketing to promote their businesses, (f) for at least 1 year. The exclusion criteria were (a) any preexisting personal or professional relationship with the researcher and (b) under the age of 18.

I gained access to participants by searching social media platforms, including Twitter and LinkedIn, for SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States. When appropriate enterprises were identified, a working relationship was established with the business owner by sending a recruitment email through the publicly available contact link on the business's social media profile. The recruitment email included a brief overview of the study's purpose and nature of the study, the inclusion criteria, an invitation to participate, and the researcher's contact information.

When I was contacted by business owners interested in the study, building a working relationship continued by emailing the informed consent form as a Microsoft Word email attachment and scheduling a preliminary phone call. The preliminary phone call took approximately 10 minutes and was scheduled at the business owner's convenience. During the preliminary phone call, the business owner was asked to state *yes* or *no* regarding whether they met each inclusion criterion in the study. If they answered *no* to any criteria, they were thanked for their interest in the study and told they were not eligible to participate. They were invited to review the informed consent form if they answered *yes* to all the inclusion criteria.

The population was owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States. The target population from which the sample was recruited was owners of SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States.

Members of the target population must also be using social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to promote their businesses through social media marketing. The target population was expected to be smaller than the overall population because not all SME owners utilize social media marketing to promote their businesses (Saleem et al., 2021; Tolstoy et al., 2021). However, it was necessary to target SME owners who utilize social media marketing because only they can provide relevant data to address the research question, which is focused on social media strategies SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States used to increase brand awareness.

Purposeful sampling was used for this study. Purposeful sampling is a nonprobabilistic method that focuses recruitment efforts on individuals likely to have the knowledge and experience necessary to provide relevant data (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method is typically the most appropriate procedure for qualitative descriptive research (Sandelowski, 2010). This method was appropriate in this study because it facilitated the collection of the most relevant data possible using only limited time and resources (see Palinkas et al., 2015). A disadvantage of purposeful sampling is that the findings in this study would not be generalizable (see Palinkas et al., 2015). However, generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, and procedures were used to assist the reader in assessing the transferability of the findings on a case-by-case basis to other samples and settings, as discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this study. The purposeful sampling method used was criterion sampling, in which a set of inclusion criteria defined the target population.

The inclusion criteria: (a) SEM owners, (b) in the convenience store market, (c) in the Midwestern United States, (d) for at least 2 years, (e) who have used social media marketing to promote their businesses, (f) for at least 1 year. The exclusion criteria: (a) any preexisting personal or professional relationship with the researcher and (b) under age 18. Twelve participants were recruited, which is consistent with the recommendation of Braun and Clarke (2013) that qualitative research should include at least eight participants to reach data saturation. The final sample size was determined when data saturation was achieved. Data saturation occurs when additional data collection and analysis cease to yield new themes and insights (Fusch & Ness, 2015). This means that analysis of the data from the interviews with the ninth and 10th participants resulted in identifying no themes or codes that had not previously been identified in the data from earlier participants. Participant recruitment and data collection were concluded when data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Activities

Instruments

The primary instrument of data collection in this study was the researcher. Data collection was through a one-to-one, semistructured interview with each participant (Newcomer et al., 2015). Semistructured interviews involve asking scripted, open-ended questions that participants must answer in their own words, which cannot be answered with only a *yes* or *no* (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The semistructured interview format is the most appropriate data collection procedure for qualitative descriptive research (Sandelowski, 2010), and it was an appropriate format to use in this study to maintain a

focus on relevant topics while inviting the participants to answer in their own words, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2011). Semi-structured interviewing also allows the researcher to ask probing follow-up questions when additional detail or clarifications of a previous response are desirable.

The semistructured interviews were conducted according to a researcher-developed interview protocol, provided in the interview questions identified in this study. The interview guide began with seven closed-ended demographic questions. Collecting and reporting demographic information in qualitative studies is essential to enabling readers to assess the transferability of the findings to other samples and settings through case-by-case comparison (Shenton, 2004). The remaining six questions in the interview guide and open-ended, semistructured questions were designed to elicit data relevant to addressing the research question.

Data Collection

In this study, the technology acceptance model was anticipated to be a sufficient framework for organizing and relating the data to the previous literature. Data collection was through one-to-one, semistructured interviews. One interview was conducted with each participant. The interviews were conducted through the online videoconference application Zoom to enable the researcher and the participant to see each other's faces while minimizing travel time, inconvenience, and potential COVID-19 exposure to the researcher and the participants. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher greeted the participant and briefly reviewed the purpose and nature of the study and the terms of informed consent. The participant then asked permission to activate Zoom's integrated

audio-recording feature, which was used to audio record the interview to ensure accurate transcription. The interview questions were then asked in the order in the guide, with follow-up questions being asked as necessary.

After all scripted and follow-up questions had been asked, the researcher notified the participant that the audio recorder was being deactivated. The researcher explained the member-checking procedure to the participant. Member checking means that the participant will review the researcher's preliminary interpretation of their data and either verify it or recommend corrections (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participant was asked to review the researcher's preliminary interpretations and, by return email, either verify their interpretations of the participant's intended meanings or recommend corrections. Semi-structured interviews are preferred in this study as they provide in-depth data and allow respondents to elaborate on their responses.

Interview Questions

The following questions were asked of the study participants:

Demographics Questions

1. How many employees does your business have?
2. How many locations does your business have?
3. How many years have you been the owner of your business?
4. What are your business's approximate annual revenues?
5. How long have you been using social media to promote your business?
6. What social media platforms do you use to promote your business?

7. What are your approximate annual expenditures on marketing generally and on social media marketing specifically?

Semistructured Interview Questions

1. What social media marketing strategies do you use to promote your business? Please describe them in as much detail as possible.

2. How do you describe the outcomes social media marketing has on customer awareness of your business and brand?

3. How do you describe the effects of social media marketing on interactions between your employees and customers, and why?

4. How do you describe the effects of social media marketing on the size of your customer base, and why?

5. How do you describe the effects of social media marketing on your business's revenues, and why?

6. What other responses can you share that I have not asked?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word documents using Zoom's automated transcription feature. The transcripts were then verified and deidentified by the researcher. Researcher verification consisted of reading and rereading the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings and making necessary corrections. During the verification process, all personally identifiable information were removed from the transcripts, and no copies of those included personally identifiable information were preserved. Participants' real names were

replaced with alphanumeric codes (P1, P2, etc.). The original audio recordings will be stored securely for 5 years, as discussed in more detail Section 3 of this study.

The data were analyzed using the inductive, thematic procedure described by Terry et al. (2017). An inductive procedure involves sorting the data into emergent categories that correspond to patterns of meaning identified in the data rather than into predefined categories, and it is appropriate for minimizing the influence of researcher preconceptions on the analysis and allowing new understandings to emerge (Terry et al., 2017). A thematic procedure involves identifying the significant findings from a small set of propositions corresponding to overarching patterns of meaning in the data and incorporating the perspectives of all or most participants (Terry et al., 2017). Thematic analysis can enhance the credibility of the findings by basing them on multiple perspectives, thereby minimizing the potential influence of individual participants' biases and errors.

The researcher-verified, de-identified transcripts were imported as source files into NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). QDAS does not automate the analysis procedure, but it can contribute to the reliability of an analysis by maintaining a clear record of the decisions the researcher makes when analyzing the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The six steps of the inductive, thematic procedure that were applied to the data are (a) reading and rereading the data to gain familiarity with it, (b) coding the data by grouping and labeling statements with similar meanings, (c) searching for themes in the data by grouping related codes, (d) reviewing the themes by checking them against the original data, (e) naming the themes, and (f) presenting the findings. Methodological

triangulation was achieved in the study by using two data collection methods: semistructured interviews and open-ended questionnaires.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Dependability is the qualitative standard that is analogous to the quantitative construct of reliability, and it refers to the reliability of study findings in the same research context at a different time to verify the integrity of the study procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). In this study, dependability was strengthened by providing clear, detailed descriptions of the study procedures to facilitate their replication, if necessary, as Shenton (2004) recommended. As described in this study's data collection techniques section, member checking was also used to enhance dependability, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Using an interview guide during data collection also contributed to the study's reliability, as Shenton (2004) recommended. I used the interview guide to collect all the data.

Validity

Credibility refers to the accuracy with which the findings in a study reflect the reality they are intended to represent, and it is analogous to quantitative internal validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Credibility was strengthened in this study through audio recording of the interviews and researcher verification of the transcripts to ensure that errors do not enter the data during transcription. A member-checking procedure enhanced credibility by allowing participants to verify that the researcher's interpretations of their data were accurate, as Shenton (2004) recommended. When the participant members

checked the preliminary researcher interpretations of their data, they were invited to verify or recommend corrections by email (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This procedure ensured errors did not enter the findings because the researcher misinterpreted the data.

A thematic analysis procedure minimizes the potential for individual participants' biases and errors to influence the findings by basing the major findings on themes that incorporate all or most participants' perspectives (Terry et al., 2017). Findings that diverge from those expressed by most participants were presented as discrepant findings in Chapter 4 while presenting the themes from which they diverge. However, the attestation of most participants supported the study's significant findings.

Transferability corresponds to quantitative external validity, which refers to the degree to which study findings hold samples and settings other than those from which they were derived (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To assist the reader in assessing the transferability of the findings in this study, demographic data about the sample was collected and reported to facilitate comparison with other samples, as Shenton (2004) recommends. Using this demographic data, the reader can compare the characteristics of the sample in this study to the characteristics of other samples in which they may be interested to assess how transferable the findings in this study may be to the other samples. Thick descriptions of the findings were also provided in Section 3, using participants' own words as evidence for all findings to convey the perspectives and contexts from which participants were speaking, as recommended by Shenton (2004). Qualitative data is grounded in or most valid concerning the perspectives and contexts of the participants from which it is drawn and presenting participants' own words when

reporting the results is an effective way to convey those perspectives and contexts so that the reader can assess transferability.

Conformability corresponds to quantitative objectivity, and it refers to the extent to which findings in a study reflect the participants' views rather than researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). A bracketing procedure was used to enhance conformability in this study, as Tufford and Newman (2012) recommended, and it was discussed in more detail in this study's Role of the Researcher section. Direct quotes from the data were provided as evidence for all findings to allow the reader to assess conformability independently by comparing the researcher's interpretations to the data samples from which they were derived, as Shenton (2004) recommended. Member-checking also strengthened conformability by enabling the participants to verify that the researcher's interpretations match their intended meanings and are not artifacts of researcher bias, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Data saturation was used to improve the study's conformability. After data saturation was achieved, no more analyses were performed.

Transition and Summary

A qualitative methodological approach and a descriptive design were used in this study. According to a researcher-developed interview guide, data was collected through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews via Zoom. The participants were a purposeful sample of at least 10 SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States who use social media marketing to promote their businesses. The final sample size was determined when data saturation was achieved. Data analysis was

conducted on de-identified, researcher-verified transcripts of the audio-recorded interviews in NVivo 12 software, using an inductive, thematic procedure. Informed consent was obtained from potential participants before any data was collected. Participants' identities were kept confidential. Section 1 provided the foundation of this study, and Section 2 introduced the study's methodology. Section 3 of this study will include the results of the study and conclusions, discussion, interpretations, and recommendations.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

This qualitative pragmatic study was conducted to explore the social media strategies that SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with SME business owners in the Midwestern United States convenience store market. The research question formulated to guide this study was: What social media strategies do SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance, as well as the effects of those strategies? Three themes emerged during data analysis to address this question: (a) diverse, cost-saving social media strategies; (b) social media strategies tend to increase customer base and revenue; and (c) social media strategies increase brand awareness and positive customer-employee interactions. The findings indicate that SMEs in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use social media strategies to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance and the effects of those strategies.

Presentation of the Findings

Eight SME owners participated in the interviews from which related social media marketing strategies and their impacts were identified and analyzed. Three primary themes emerged: (a) diverse, cost-saving social media strategies; (b) social media strategies tend to increase customer base and revenue; and (c) social media strategies increase brand awareness and positive customer-employee interactions. These feeds show how SMEs adopt social media sites in many aspects, from marketing and communication

to establishing a customer base and boosting business. The results highlight the opportunities and threats of social media marketing for small business needs, which emulate the dynamism incumbent in marketing for SME concerns. Thus, participants' perceptions outlined the best practices for social network marketing and potentially problematic areas that can be addressed by demonstrating more certain or immediate influence. The following sections shall review each theme in more detail, with the help of participants and relevant literature.

Theme 1: Diverse, Cost-Saving Social Media Strategies

There are reflections on how social media strategies contribute to building top-of-mind among SMEs and growing sales. Other activities include using friends, family, and even customers to post about the SME on social media platforms (Amoah & Jibril, 2021). These include posting videos according to the time, posting daily, and connecting different social media accounts. Three participants reported using friends, family, and customers to post information regarding the SME. This was echoed by P5, who said: "Most of my strategies are like friends and family that we know we tell them what products we have, and they post stuff on their social media." Such an approach ensures that SMEs develop awareness campaigns that rely on referrals from customer connections already familiar with the brands. P7 took this further by having customers create content: "People do it for me. The people come in, and they use TikTok, they would go in, and they will do Facebook videos and what it is like." This made the strategy generate user content that led to an appeal to authenticity.

The second most frequently mentioned approach was video content, which three participants described. P2 said, “The social media that we employ, and it is seen today by the whole world, is on TikTok, and in it, we post videos in the store. We also use reels on Instagram.” P3 echoed this approach: “The social media approaches we employ, it employs the reels, it employs short clips.” This concurs with the studies regarding the use of video material in social media marketing strategies. Other strategic approaches include timing posts for maximum engagement, as P1 described: “So one of the strategies we use is timing the posts—timing to get attention in the evening when everyone is at home or in the morning before everyone leaves for work.” P2 highlighted the efficiency of linking accounts: “We use Reels on Instagram. So, we put music to videos showing what we are doing in the store. Moreover, that goes over to Facebook, which is linked to them; they have it.” These strategies show how innovative SMEs harness social media platforms (Belás et al., 2021). The multispectral initiatives the participants undertake are characteristic of social media marketing to SMEs because they help to enhance the target business’s recognition among customers at a decent cost per outcome.

Theme 2: Social Media Strategies Tend to Increase Customer Base and Revenue

The results revealed that more than three quarters of the participants saw growth in their overall customer traffic after employing social media marketing, with a majority also recording improved revenues. However, three participants gave partly contradictory information, suggesting no revenue growth or ambivalence about the outcome. All eight participants pointed to growing their customer base through social media marketing. P1, when asked about social media, commented, “It is good, very good. I do think it assists a

lot.” Regarding profit, P1 shared that it “helps on a broader basis, with more known customers, an expanded customer base, and unknown customers.” This evidence indicates the use of social media can increase SMEs’ outreach.

‘Since we are less than a year old [the business is less], our followers on social media are not that many; we have less than 1000 people, but there are more than 1000 people in the region.’ Social media marketing is how to increase that size”. This shows that social media allows new businesses to create and develop a customer base within a relatively short time (Cheng & Shiu, 2019). Five participants directly associate the growth of their customer base with the growth of overall revenues. P2 responded, “Social media helps our business grow more so that we can get more customers to come in and order online,” which P2 added propels sales significantly. P3 noted expanded geographical reach: “Sometimes, we send products to Jamaicans who reside in the rural areas of different states and do not have an opportunity to buy Jamaican products, so we will send them there.” These findings extend the existing literature regarding the impact of social media performance.

Of the participants, three gave contradictory information. P4 said, “It has not yet resulted in getting any revenues in.” As for the third point, the respondents expressed confidence that as the area grows to appreciate Instagram, the growth will lead to revenues flowing to them. P5 expressed uncertainty: “On the revenue side of it, I do not know yet.” P7 stated that most revenue growth could be attributed to word of mouth rather than social marketing. Ideally, these mixed experiences point to the social media marketing-revenue growth correlation for SMEs, as Clauss et al. (2022) pointed out.

Nonetheless, participants' perceptions of the relationship between social media marketing and company performance show discrepancies, with social media marketing benefiting some more and others less; however, overall, there was more positive perception such that even participants who did not see direct returns of revenues wanted more of social media marketing because it has the potential to do so in future. This implies that although social media marketing maintained an upward trend in customer base, its effect on the revenues depended on some aspects, such as the maturity stage of the business, local environment, and industry type.

Theme 3: Brand Awareness and Positive Customer-Employee Interactions

Social media marketing enabled brand awareness and improved social relations between employees and customers. The responses received all indicated heightened brand familiarity; six participants pointed to enhanced customer-employee relations. P2 highlighted social media's effectiveness in promoting events:

If we post that [digital] flyer on the social media as compared to putting it [on paper] on the door ... once they see it in the social media, the result is better because more people turn up for the cooking class with the help of that flyer.

This shows the effectiveness of social media, especially in event marketing and brand promotion, as Ancillai et al. (2019) noted. P3 emphasized user-generated content's role:

We have been getting much efficiency in these sites, particularly the Facebook sites where we are in a position to have the customers posting what we offer, posting their experiences, posting their photos, posting their videos of times they make use of items we offer at the store.

This accords with prior studies on user-generated content to raise brand familiarity among consumers (Basri & Siam, 2019). P8 noted the subtle impact of social media presence: “People often tell me, ‘I follow you on Facebook,’ but those people are a big shock because they do not engage with the page at all, but they know everything that we do.” This underscores the need to consider both the measure of engagement, which is seen, and that which is not seen in evaluating the measure of the impact of social media platforms.

Five of the six participants who also completed a post-study survey indicated that social media marketing for firms positively impacted customer-employee relations. P3 said,

It has allowed us to have friendly dialogue as far as building the brand is concerned because the posts on a particular social media platform will often give us a point of contact with customers whenever they patronize the store because there will always be something to discuss.

This illustrates how online communications can supplement face-to-face customer interactions (Cheng & Shiu, 2019). P4 highlighted social media’s role in customer service: “I believe in social media; the customers can contact me through messenger or Instagram to place an order, or If they have questions regarding our product, they can ask me there.” This is backed by studies on the ability of social media platforms to increase customer satisfaction in SMEs (Bartolacci et al., 2020). In essence, the research supports the view that social media marketing is a want-to-use tool in SMEs’ production lines

since it is not only used in the outright sale of products but also enhances the company's brand image and management of customers.

Theme 4: Positive Customer and Employee Interactions

According to the analysis, promoting positive communication between the organization's customers and employees is essential in enhancing the organization's performance. Son and Niehm (2021) explained that outcome outcomes are the functionalization among customers, employees, and the organization. Each of the six participants recognized the value of maintaining good customer and employee relations for customer loyalty and enhanced employee productivity. Three key subthemes emerged as elements of excellent service: the three fundamental components: (a) empathy and active listening, (b) service personalization, (c) employee development and delegation of authority.

Empathy and active listening were considered to enhance the relations between customers and employees. Terry et al. (2017) established that these skills enhance customer satisfaction and organizational employee performance. In their interviews, P4 said: "When the organization adopted empathy and active listening in the employee's behavior, there was a decrease in the number of customer complaints and an increase in customer satisfaction." P1 described implementing an empathy training program: "Among the large plan, the program on the type of training for employees who have contact with customers based on empathy was another. I only understood that it consisted of role-play, case scenario, and real-life-implemented techniques in active listening." The results of this initiative were tangible: Since the inception of this program, we have

observed a decreased level of customer complaints that tend to escalate and improved perceptible customer identification of employees.

P6 highlighted the impact on employee job satisfaction: “The employees believe they are helping the customers and making a change,” which has an effect on making the job satisfying and hence has had a negative trend in the level of employee turnover in the customer service section. This is well supported by literature on self-determination theory and engagement, specifically on the meaningfulness of work (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This revealed that while customer satisfaction and employee engagement are essential for service businesses, they can be better by offering customers personalized service instead of a one-size-fits-all approach. Each of the six respondents highlighted the need for customer differentiation. This is in harmony with Niehm (2021) where the authors endeavored to show, using customer experience theory, that optimized customer engagement results in improved customer loyalty and job satisfaction.

P3 described implementing a customer relationship management (CRM) system to facilitate personalized service: “We have had an extremely elaborate CRM system that our employees can use to capture a broad perspective of their interaction with any particular client. This allows them to afford the clients the most personalized service.” The benefits were clear: Participants and respondents agreed that clients testify to being given a lot of attention and quality services, and employee testimonies prove that, according to P3, “It prepares them with confidence on how to handle situations.” P5 shared the impact of encouraging employees to go off-script: “Instead of massive call flow scripts which constricted employees’ actions in our organization. However, what we

did was to keep them flexible depending on the business and personality of the buyer.” This approach yielded positive results. P5 said, “This beautified the employees at their working places such as this clientele.” According to P5, “our employees are more satisfied and committed to their work when they are friended with the authority to make decisions and find ways to achieve organizational goals and improve guests’ satisfaction.”

Employee autonomy finally proved to be a significant variable in enhancing customer-employee contact. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a positive correlation existed between extra-role customer selling behavior and customer satisfaction and loyalty. P4 said, “When our employees are allowed to make decisions and solve issues at their workplace without seeking senior management approval, we also solve problems faster apart from enhancing the morale and productivity of employees.” P2 discussed implementing an employee empowerment initiative: “We are new to a ‘Make it Right’ program by allowing the front-line workers to solve customers’ complaints or to provide refunds or free services in the absence of the managers but within a certain limit.” The results were significant: Adopting this solution has significantly reduced customer response time and increased first-call answer rates. More importantly, our employees’ messages of appreciation and feeling valued and trusted provided the tactical support derived from our experimentation, which decreased customer-facing turnover by 20% (P2).

P6 shared the impact of involving employees in decision-making processes: It was found that physical and electronic customer care personnel should be permitted to

analyze policy and development meetings. This is also useful in ensuring that other departments understand how customers will likely behave (Al-Jinini et al., 2019). At the same time, P6 said, “they feel that they are equally crucial in the accomplishment of the company’s objectives and goals.” This approach expanded the role of customer service. P6 shared, “Not only is it handling complaints, but customers are playing an essential part in the developing our products and services.” P1 summarized the overall impact: “This focus on employee power has effectively set up the process, where it can be summarized that empowered employees equal better customer satisfaction; conversely, satisfied loyal customers would, in return, boost employees’ morale and job satisfaction.” This statement summarizes the relationship between the strategies of this theory and research on employee engagement and customer experience.

Connection of the Findings to the Literature

These studies’ findings are primarily aligned with current understanding and expand on the literature within social media marketing for SMEs in the convenience store sector. The following is a comparative analysis with peer-reviewed literature:

The topic of various, inexpensive social media plans supports the studies of Ainin et al. (2015) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), stating the efficiency and flexibility of social media marketing for SMEs. (Al-Jinini et al., 2019) also observe that SM marketing positively influences the SME’s performance, which is supported by the study’s observation that there was an enhanced customer network and higher revenues. The highlighted increase in the extent of brand recognition and the overall customer-employee interaction points to the research by Terry et al. (2017) that focus on social

media in the context of SMEs where the brand value is steadily enhanced, alongside the customer relations improvement.

The paper contributes to the study by proposing specific findings about the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States region that have not been heavily discussed in the literature. The insights on user-generated content, primarily TikTok, are related to the earlier published studies by Ainin et al. (2015) about the influence of user-generated content having visual and interactive aspects as social media marketing tools. The study also extends knowledge on the global reach potential of social media marketing for local SMEs, supporting and expanding on research on digital marketing's global reach for small businesses.

The variation in some participants' perception regarding the immediacy of revenue generation could either partially refute or qualify some theories from other papers, such as Ainin et al. (2015), that illustrated a direct correlation between social media marketing and revenue generation.

Scholars' investigations published since the development of the proposal, for example, Qalati et al. (2020) on social media adoption in SMEs, are consistent with this study's perspective depending on the various strategies that the owners of convenience stores have adopted. Furthermore, Ting et al. (2020) recently conducted a study on the effects of social media marketing on brand equity in SMEs; this also supports the study's observation on enhancing brand awareness through social media management. Thus, this analysis shows that the study supports the existing literature significantly, enriches understanding of specific market conditions, and identifies further research opportunities,

primarily related to the long-term revenue consequences of social media marketing for SMEs.

Relevance of the Findings to the Conceptual Framework

The findings closely align with and support the critical elements of the conceptual framework. The framework centers on how SMEs, especially convenience stores, can strategically use social media marketing to improve brand awareness and business performance (Davis, 1989, as cited in Silva, 2015). The first theme identified low-cost social media strategies SMEs use, matching the framework's premise that social media offers a cost-effective way for SMEs with limited budgets to increase brand recognition and sales. Participants leveraged personal networks on social media, exemplifying a grassroots approach. Additional tactics like videos, daily posts, and cross-platform linking maximize impact while minimizing financial investment (Ainin et al., 2015). This finding relates to the TAM factor of perceived usefulness, where convenience store owners understand the benefits achieved by using social media in their marketing tasks at a minimal cost. The approach used by participants shows how the TAM's notions of external variables affect the adoption process (Davis, 1989, as cited in Silva, 2015). For instance, limited budgets and the requirement for adequate coverage in targeting the entire client base forced owners of stores to regard social media as a helpful tool, consequently raising the likelihood of its adoption. These findings support Davis's (1989, as cited in Silva, 2015) premise that perceived usefulness is one of the main predictors influencing a particular technology's acceptance.

The second theme revealed that social media significantly expands customer bases and boosts revenue, resonating with the framework's focus on the relationship between engagement and results. SMEs attract and build loyalty among broader audiences through platforms like TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, as Qalati et al. (2020) posited. Promotions such as Taco Tuesday attract customers and drive sales, illustrating social media's direct impact. Social media is also a two-way form that enables businesses to communicate with customers and gain feedback and loyalty, essential for retention and long-term success. This aligns with the perceived ease of use of the TAM since SMEs experience easy use of social media platforms in communicating with customers and creating awareness that leads to adopting the technologies (Qalati et al., 2020). The interaction and feedback supported in the social media networks align with the TAM's claim regarding the ease of using interfaces that offer high returns with insignificant efforts from the users (Qalati et al., 2020). The TAM states that as the perceived ease of use increases, the perceived usefulness will also increase, and this led to the continued use of social media, hence justifying the use in the business strategies as it found to have tangible benefits such as increased customers and revenues.

The third theme highlighted social media's role in enhancing brand visibility and facilitating positive customer-employee interactions, backing the framework's assertion that social media is powerful for strengthening reputation. Encouraging user-generated content like customer TikTok videos benefits SMEs with authentic, relatable promotions. Interactive, visual platforms help businesses craft compelling brand narratives that attract and keep customers (Gligor & Bozkurt, 2021). Further, social media enables favorable

interactions, supporting a positive brand image and satisfaction. These findings align with the perceived usefulness/attitude toward using and perceived usefulness/behavioral intention to use parts of TAM, as positive usage consequences in social media platforms enhance the convenience store owners' positive attitude and intentions of using social media platforms for business growth.

The increase in brand exposure and pleasant customer-employee interpersonal communication through social media stands well with the TAM in that the interaction with the technology influences the general attitude and usage intention. Thus, the nature and actualization of social media marketing strategies, which primarily involve a focus on the content provided and created by users of the platforms, show how the specificity of customer engagement and brand narrative opportunities as external variables of the TAM make both perceived usefulness and ease of use facilitate the adoption and sustained usage of social media in the context of businesses.

The alignment of findings and framework underscores its validity in explaining SME social media strategy. Reflecting on participant experiences accurately portrays how cost-effective social media is when it comes to influencing engagement and profits, as well as the importance of visibility (Kumar, 2020). Connecting findings strengthen understanding of real-world implementation and effectiveness in achieving goals. This validates and provides insight into the framework to help other SMEs optimize social media strategies.

Relevance to the Thematic/Existing Literature

The study's findings corroborate the literature on social media marketing, which suggests that social media marketing is efficient and all-around for SMEs. Accordingly, the participants stated they utilized the web systems using UGC, videos, and cross-linking. This aligns with the literature review revealing that SMEs must adopt a differentiated strategy to develop an effective social media strategy using low resources (Ainin et al., 2015). The necessity of friends, families, and customers to develop and disseminate content is the electronic word-of-mouth concept, which has earlier been identified as a strength for SMEs in literature (Cheung & Thadani, 2012). Using video promotion through TikTok and Instagram Reels is relevant to contemporary social media marketing trends, focusing on graphic and communicative materials.

According to the findings, most participants recorded an increase in their customer base and revenue, which supports the positive effects of social media marketing on SMEs, as supported by other scholars (Ainin et al., 2015; Tajvidi & Karami, 2017). The possibility of the guests being from other areas and not local, hence being able to be reached on social media, corresponds to the literature on the geographical expanses covered by small business digital marketing possibilities. The variation in the results of some participants regarding the revenue increment is also essential in understanding that such improvements are not static but have variability and would require long-term strategy formulation.

The results highlighting the effects of social media marketing on brand awareness align with prior research on the use of social media in enhancing brand recognition for

SMEs. Employing customer-generated content and reviews is consistent with the literature on social proof and authenticity in social media marketing. The claimed positive interaction between customers and employees implemented through social media aligns with the theoretical papers on relationship marketing and customer relation management in the current world. The possibility of communicating directly and often with customers through social media enhances previous research concerning the connection of social media to relationship building for SMEs.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

The findings from this study connect to and build upon the existing research on using social media effectively in business, especially for SMEs in the convenience store industry in the Midwestern United States. Previous literature emphasizes several aspects of social media marketing that this study confirms and expounds on. According to the study, social media is cost-effective for SMEs. According to a study by Malesev and Cherry (2021), platforms offer affordable solutions for businesses with limited budgets, allowing such enterprises to reach wide audiences. Echoing this, participants of a similar study by Madhura and Panakaje (2022) reported that economic strategies like leveraging personal networks, daily posting, and cross-platform sharing increased awareness and sales. Their grassroots approach aligns with research demonstrating that SMEs can significantly impact marketing with minimal funds.

The findings also back literature emphasizing social media's impact on customer engagement and revenue. A study by Yee et al. (2022) highlights that active engagement fosters loyalty and drives sales. SMEs consistently use platforms like TikTok, Facebook,

and Instagram to engage customers, promote events, and enhance loyalty. Notably, the findings of Ancillai et al. (2019) provide evidence that promotions like Taco Tuesday directly boosted revenue, linking engagement to performance. This empirical data supports and expands existing knowledge with specific campaign examples in the SME context.

Social media's role in strengthening brand visibility and positive customer relations is well-documented in the literature. In their study, Wibowo and Iriantini (2022) highlighted the importance of user-generated content in enhancing brand visibility and authenticity. Aligning with this, SMEs benefited from customer-created content like TikTok videos providing authentic promotions. The study extends this by showing that positive customer-employee interactions facilitated through social media contributed to favorable branding and satisfaction, which are crucial for a strong presence and loyalty.

While essentially conforming to prior work, the findings also diverged from some highlighted challenges, like difficulty consistently creating content and managing multiple platforms. Participants reported that leveraging networks and cross-platform strategies mitigated issues, allowing active presence with minimal hurdles (Malesev & Cherry, 2021). This divergence suggests that perceived challenges may vary by context and strategies used. In conclusion, the study connects to and expands the existing knowledge on effective practices, mainly social media marketing's SME use.

As per the participants of this study, SME owners' most utilized social media strategy to increase brand awareness and grow sales is encouraging family, friends, and customers to post about the SME on social media platforms. Social media platforms have

proven an effective strategy for SMEs to reach more customers. Organic social media provides SME owners a quick and cost-free way to share regular content and showcase all the latest deals. Brand awareness fosters a community that generates word-of-mouth buzz, such as, “I love this product, and I know you will too” (Yee et al., 2022). Friends and family are part of this community and play a crucial role in creating an audience by posting about the SME on social media. The audience then becomes a pipeline for the SME’s most relevant customers. Businesses gain high brand recognition on social media through friends, family, and customers, increasing fans and potential customers.

The participants also highlighted the effectiveness of posting videos on Facebook and TikTok to enhance SME sales. Social media platforms such as TikTok are dynamic and contain content that can be a powerful asset for SMEs. Similarly, Hinson et al. (2019) emphasized that SMEs risk falling behind their competitors by not creating engaging marketing videos on TikTok and Facebook. This underscores the importance of staying up to date with social media trends and constantly innovating to keep the audience’s attention.

The results of this study suggest that social media strategies increase SMEs’ customer base. Social media marketing is essential for SMEs looking to expand their customer base (Hinson et al., 2019). With the number of people using social media growing daily, it provides an unmatched opportunity for businesses to reach a larger audience and connect with them. As reported by the participants, strategies such as having a strong social media presence and customer base result in increased revenue. The

use of social media may expand the customer base through social media platforms, potentially resulting in increased sales and revenue among SMEs.

When SMEs invest in social media advertising through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, TikTok, and Instagram, they are likely to reach more potential customers, increase market share and customer base, and thus increase revenue (Prasanna et al., 2019). To grow their sales and revenue, SMEs need a large customer base, which can be enhanced by adopting social media strategies to research more customers.

This research suggests that social media strategies increased positive customer-employee relationships and brand awareness of the SME's products. Through the social media strategies, participants indicated they experienced increased brand awareness of the SMEs and positive relationships and interactions between employees and customers (Yee et al., 2022). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram increase interaction between customers and SME employees through sharing content about SMEs' store and their products and through customers posting about the store or sharing the store's posts on social media (Prasanna et al., 2019). This contributes to the positive brand image of other potential customers who would prefer doing business with the SMEs in question.

SMEs should develop social media strategies to foster the marketing of their products and services. The current research findings indicated that social media strategies contribute to increased customer base and revenue for SMEs. As a result, every manager in SMEs should aim to improve their social media strategies through regular updates on

the current state of affairs concerning online marketing, including current platforms. Emerging platforms such as TikTok may have new potential customers that would increase the customer base for SMEs.

Employee training on social media usage should provide regular updates on the current trends in digital marketing. Social media platforms enhance communication between SMEs and their customers. However, poor use of social media due to lack of training on social media influenced communication negatively (Hsiao et al., 2020). Offering training to employees increased their digital marketing skills, which could help them reach more customers, thus increasing their customer base and revenue by reaching more potential customers (Yee et al., 2022). To disseminate the final results, the researcher will present this study at a national conference involving SME owners.

Implications for Social Change

There are several implications for social change. The findings of this study increase SME managers' and owners' understanding of the importance of implementing social media marketing strategies to improve connection to consumers. SME owners and managers can use this study's findings to increase their customer base and revenue. The findings provide insights into the influence of SMEs' social media marketing strategies in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States. They can help SME owners improve their strategies, such as using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, to increase brand awareness about SMEs (Hinson et al., 2019). Moreover, the findings help SME managers and owners identify the most impactful social media marketing strategies to improve customer relationship management and brand awareness.

The findings enable SME managers and owners to develop well-informed social media marketing policies to attain business goals. Based on the results of this study, changes made to the SMEs' marketing policies could improve the organizations' competitiveness, including increased customer base and revenue, as well as increased brand awareness. This can lead to increased growth of SMEs that could offer job opportunities for individuals within the community, thus contributing to positive social change. Moreover, the insights gained from this study can help SMEs optimize their limited resources by focusing on the most effective social media strategies, potentially leading to more sustainable business practices and long-term success in the digital marketplace.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study indicated that social media marketing strategies increase customer base, revenue, brand awareness, and positive customer-employee interactions. An increase in customer base, revenue, brand awareness, and positive customer-employee interactions could improve SMEs' performance. However, this study failed to demonstrate how the use of social media may increase among SMEs, especially those startup SMEs. Therefore, to fill this gap, future researchers need to consider exploring strategies for increasing the use of social media among startup SMEs.

This study was limited by purposive sampling, which is prone to researcher bias, which may threaten the conformability of study findings in qualitative research. Thus, further research should be conducted using random sampling techniques in a quantitative study to determine the relationship between social media strategies, including platforms

such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and SME performance. The current study focused on the social media strategies SME owners in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States use to increase brand awareness and grow sales to improve performance. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that future studies focus on the data security issues associated with using technology in SMEs.

Reflections and Conclusions

In this study, I have learned that qualitative research requires primary data to strengthen its reliability and that the research design may affect the research outcome. I have also learned that the methodologies used, especially in selecting sample participants, such as purposive sampling, may lead to researcher bias because choosing participants from a target population lies with the researcher. My understanding changed because I believed the study findings would disagree with previous studies. However, the findings did not necessarily have to concur or disagree with most previous studies. The literature review provided insight into how social media enhances SMEs' performance through increased customer base, brand awareness, and revenue. While conducting this research was vigorous and time-consuming, the resultant outcomes have answered the research questions and filled the gap in the literature regarding the problem space of limited information on social media strategies and SME performance. In this study, social media strategies could expand market share and customer base to enhance revenue.

According to the study, SMEs using social media strategies in the convenience store market in the Midwestern United States increase brand awareness and sales growth, thus enhancing their performance. Social media has propelled businesses globally,

including SMEs and multinational organizations, to use social media to increase their presence with potential customers. In this study, we learn that using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok could promote brand awareness to loyal customers as well as new and potential customers. This contributes to increased revenue and SME performance. Social media enhances the real-time acquisition and sharing of knowledge and information about a product to potential customers through brand awareness. Therefore, SMEs should implement social marketing strategies to enhance their growth and development, especially for startup SMEs with limited online presence. Further research may be needed to determine the most effective social media strategy and how to increase social media usage among SMEs.

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