2-19-2025

Management Strategies and Processes for Improving Product Returns

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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by

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M.B.A., American InterContinental University-Atlanta, 2005

B.A., Concordia University-Wisconsin, 2000

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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March 2025

Abstract

Inadequate returns management (RM) capabilities among supply chain and logistics managers can lead to inefficiencies in handling product returns, increasing operational costs and reducing overall profitability. Without effective RM strategies, managers may struggle to minimize the financial impact of product returns on business performance. Grounded in the resource-based view theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was used to explore how supply chain and logistics managers implement RM strategies and processes to effectively and efficiently handle product returns. The participants were two senior supply chain managers with over five years of experience in reverse logistics and supply chain management, from distinct Midwest-based companies in the United States, both of whom had successfully implemented strategies and processes for managing product returns. Data collection involved conducting phone interviews with participants using semistructured interview techniques. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: enhancing customer experience, mitigating RM costs, and aligning adequate RM strategies and processes. A key recommendation is for supply chain and logistics managers in the retail and e-tail industries to prioritize strategies and processes that optimize the management of product returns, thereby enhancing operational efficiency and supporting sustainable growth across the supply chain. The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve RM strategies and processes, enhancing the effective handling of product returns while promoting reuse, refurbishment, and recycling. These practices contribute to keeping products in circulation rather than landfills, benefiting both consumers and society at large.

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Dedication

I dedicate this research study to my mother, Joan Thornton; my uncle, Jerome Thornton, affectionately known as Bony; and my uncle, Otha Thornton, known as O. They were pillars of strength during my trials and tribulations, offering unwavering support and encouragement that fueled my resilience and determination. The wisdom and kindness of my mother and uncles profoundly shaped my life, leaving an indelible impact. This study honors their invaluable influence, celebrating the faith and inspiration they instilled in me. My Uncle Bony's and my mother's memories continue to inspire me daily. Rest in peace, Mom and Uncle Bony—your legacy lives on through this work and the countless lives you touched with your compassion and generosity.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank God for blessing me with the strength to navigate this journey. I want to start by thanking my wife, Denise, who convinced me this would be a valuable and rewarding journey. I am deeply grateful to my loving wife for her unwavering support throughout this challenging path. Honey, it's been tough, but we've made it together.

I also want to express my heartfelt appreciation to all my children, Marcus, Marquesa, Marvin, Melvin, Alisha, Janeah and host of grandchildren for their continuous support and encouragement; we accomplished this as a family.

Additionally, I thank my committee members for their patience, dedication, and invaluable feedback that kept me on track to complete the DBA program. Your guidance and encouragement have been crucial, and I am profoundly grateful for your support throughout this challenging yet rewarding experience.

Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The implementation of successful returns management (RM) strategies and processes is essential for successful business management. Establishing an adequate RM program requires supply chain and logistics leadership support to ensure adoption is successful (Hjort et al., 2019; Rollecke et al., 2018). Chen et al. (2017) indicated from a managerial perspective, understanding benefits of RM strategies may help companies make informed decisions about their returns policies, processes, and technology investments, leading to improved operational efficiency and increased profitability. Implementing RM practices may enhance supply chain and logistics operations, allowing companies to uphold positive customer relationships while streamlining their processes for greater efficiency (Huang et al., 2016). Karlsson et al. (2023) conveyed product returns are a significant economic burden for businesses due to lost sales and decreased expenses. Several factors contribute to the impact of product returns on companies' financial stability. Chen et al. (2017) highlighted managing product returns has become crucial to supply chain management. Efficient and customer-friendly returns processes may set retailers apart in today's competitive market. Patale and Zohair (2023) indicated a well-thought-out RM process is a strategic asset for retail businesses to address challenges associated with returns, creating competitive advantage, improving customer relationships, and driving overall business success.

Background of the Problem

Despite academic literature on RM, the focus has typically been on optimizing product returns to recover value and mitigate operating costs; there is limited discourse

regarding managerial skills and knowledge of adopting returns management. Chen et al. (2017) indicated measurable managerial guidance for structuring RM programs is scarce. Patale and Zohair (2023) suggested managers' skills and overall capabilities of companies are critical in terms of achieving adequate returns management performance. Karlsson et al. (2023) claimed supply chain and logistics leadership is essential to shaping RM strategies and operational processes, ensuring alignment with overall goals and objectives.

Effective leadership ensures RM processes and strategies align with organizational goals and objectives. Chen et al. (2017) argued RM strategies and processes depend heavily on management capabilities; without competent leadership, RM cannot achieve desired outcomes. Hjort et al. (2019) claimed retailers do not have well-defined processes and strategies for implementing RM practices. Röllecke et al. (2018) indicated investing in an RM program may lead to substantial benefits and improved financial results for organizations.

If companies do not handle returns properly, it can cause problems in supply chains (Chen et al., 2017; de Araújo et al., 2018), and this could happen because some management teams do not realize how important it is to manage returns effectively, which can make it harder to set up efficient RM processes and strategies (Chen et al., 2017).

Supply chain and logistics managers implementing RM processes and strategies within supply chains may manage and control returns more efficiently. It is significant to

study managerial dimensions of RM to provide insights regarding how companies can improve their handling of returned products from a leadership standpoint.

Problem and Purpose

Surges in return costs and steady rises in return volume are due to insufficient managerial understanding of how best to implement RM strategies and processes (Chen et al., 2017, p. 253; Hjort et al., 2019, p. 769; Röllecke et al., 2018, p. 177). Approximately 52% of firms struggle to develop efficient RM strategies and processes (Klapalová, 2019, p. 150). The general business problem is that inefficient RM programs reduce profitability. The specific business problem is some supply chain and logistics managers lack skills to develop and implement efficient and effective RM strategies and processes. Therefore, this proposed qualitative multiple case study involved exploring supply chain and logistic managers' strategies to develop and implement efficient and effective RM strategies and processes. The targeted population is supply chain and logistic senior managers with 5 or more years who work in retailing companies or manufacturers in the Midwest United States who effectively implemented RM strategies and processes that enhance customer satisfaction, reduce the financial impact of returns on businesses, and promote environmentally responsible practices. This could enable etail and retail manufacturers to provide customers with reasonably priced products, create safe workplaces for employees, and eliminate waste from entering environments. In addition, companies can strategically partner with nonprofit organizations that directly work with communities facing pressing challenges, helping them to improve their lives and communities.

Population and Sampling

Qualitative research involves a wide range of data sources, including individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon or hold a specific perspective, as well as documents, images, and other nonhuman sources (Chai et al., 2021).

Once the study population and sample frame have been identified, researchers can select a purposive sample using specific criteria to select participants or cases relevant to the research question (Chai et al., 2021). For instance, with snowball sampling, current participants help identify and recruit future participants who meet study criteria. The snowball sampling method is extensively used for gathering data from hard-to-reach populations and in contexts with limited information (Dosek, 2021). I used snowball sampling to recruit potential participants who successfully designed and implemented RM strategies and processes. To collect data from potential participants, I used semistructured interviews (see Appendix A). I interviewed two senior supply chain and logistics managers in the Midwest United States to understand how they successfully designed and implemented an RM program.

Nature of the Study

Researchers can use qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods to understand research questions (Hong et al., 2018). I selected a qualitative methodology for my proposed research study because it is beneficial for exploring experiences, perspectives, and practices of participants. Researchers who use qualitative methods aim to analyze situations, events, and phenomena in natural settings (Ezer & Aksüt, 2021). According to Bloomfield and Fisher (2019), quantitative research involves generating numerical data

and establishing causal relationships between variables through formal, objective, and systematic processes. I did not need to collect and analyze numerical data to explore RM strategies and processes, which is part of the quantitative design. Therefore, I did not select the quantitative approach. Researchers who use mixed methods combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to comprehensively account for research and address complex research questions (Clark, 2019). Mixed methods studies can be a valuable approach to expand the scope of qualitative research. I did not select this method because I did not require quantitative techniques.

I considered four qualitative research designs: ethnography, narrative inquiry, phenomenological, and case study. Ethnography involves observing and studying people in their natural settings to gain a deep understanding of social and cultural practices and generate rich descriptive data for research (Stefaniak & McDonald, 2022). I did not select the ethnographic design because I was not focusing on cultural aspects of a phenomenon. Researchers use narrative inquiry to focus on human stories and experiences that are shared through life story interviews (Ford, 2020). I did not select the narrative inquiry design because I did not plan to develop a chronological narrative from participants' personal life stories. A phenomenological method involves understanding the meaning of lived experiences from perspective of individuals who had those experiences and focusing on the essential structure of experiences and how people make sense of the world around them (Guillen, 2019). I did not select the phenomenological design because I did not plan to seek information about personal implications of participants' lived experiences. Instead, I chose a multiple case study design because I used several sources

of evidence to obtain various perspectives regarding the topic.? The multiple-case study approach is appropriate for exploring complex and specific circumstances in real-world settings (Yin, 2018).

Research Question

What RM strategies and processes do supply chain managers use to manage product returns effectively and efficiently?

Interview Questions

1. What key RM strategies and derivative business processes do you use?
2. How do you apply RM strategies and processes to fit your organization's strategic business plan?
3. How do you manage product returns to prevent returns from directly affecting the organization’s revenue/sales?
4. Based on your experience, what elements of RM strategies and processes have led to customer satisfaction?
5. How did you address key challenges to implementing RM processes?
6. How are marketing and logistics integrated into RM strategies and processes?
7. What key external factors were considered in terms of developing your organization’s RM strategy and process?
8. What other pertinent information would you like to share regarding your organization’s key RM strategies and processes?

Conceptual Framework

I used the resource-based view (RBV) theory proposed by Wernerfelt and further refined by Barney as my conceptual framework. Barney (1991) suggested a firm's resources and capabilities can be a source of sustained competitive advantage. The RBV approach can effectively help a firm manage returns through resources and capabilities, providing it with a competitive advantage over rivals (Genchev et al., 2010). In RM, researchers may use the RBV theory to identify and categorize resources and capabilities that are relevant to RM. In addition, firm's' capabilities involving RM can be a valuable and rare resource that can help to sustain competitive advantages overtime (Genchev et al., 2010). RM may be an essential source of competitive advantages for firms, and investing in developing adequate RM capabilities may yield significant benefits. Huang et al. (2016) argued the RBV theory involves examining how managerial decisions and strategies may affect RM. Therefore, the RBV theory suited my proposed study on RM. Genchev et al. (2010) found all assets firms control can enhance their efficiency and effectiveness when used as organizational resources; guidance can assist in categorizing these resources to help managers focus on critical inputs that are necessary for developing adequate RM capabilities. Applying the RBV framework to my study on RM, I could gain a better understanding of internal factors that influence the success of an RM program and how firms may leverage their resources and capabilities to achieve competitive advantages.

Operational Definitions

Closed-Loop Supply Chain: Remanufacturing into the supply chain in which the second life cycle of a product starts. This involves remanufacturing, and returned products are restored for reselling (Kazemi et al., 2019).

E-commerce: Ordering goods and services over the Internet. Payment and delivery of goods and services can be conducted online or offline (Ahsa & Rahman, 2022).

E-tailing: Subset of e-commerce, which refers to the purchase of goods by consumers from retailers using the Internet (Ahsan & Rahman, 2022).

Returns Management (RM): Specialized logistics involving moving and managing products and resources after sale and delivery to customers (de Araújo et al., 2018).

RM Orientation: Firm recognition of the importance of RM to their overall business operations and performance (Chen et al., 2017).

Reverse Logistics: Process of planning, implementing, and controlling the efficient and cost-effective flow of raw materials, in-process inventory, finished goods, and related information from the point of consumption to end of origin in order to recapture value or proper disposal (Sajjanit & Rompho, 2019).

Supply Chain Management: Planning and managing of all activities involved in sourcing and procurement, conversion and logistics, and coordination and collaboration with channel partners (Peng et al., 2020).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

When drafting a doctoral research study, researchers need to be conscious of limitations. The researcher's responsibility is to explicitly and extensively report research limitations, delimitations, and assumptions to improve quality of their findings and interpretations of evidence .

Assumptions

Assumptions are claims that are accepted as accurate without further investigation (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). I assumed participants answered interview questions honestly and truthfully. I also assumed the case study design was sufficient to explore how firms implement RM programs. In addition, I assume all participants had necessary skills and knowledge to execute RM strategies and processes effectively and efficiently. Assumptions should be thoroughly considered and well-supported. Researchers must identify and record all assumptions during the investigation process because assumptions can play a significant role in shaping the direction and outcomes of investigations, so it is essential to be aware of them and consider alternative explanations (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Recognizing underlying assumptions plays a pivotal role in upholding credibility and efficiency of inquiries (Leko et al., 2021).

Furthermore, it is imperative to openly recognize and address any potential constraints or prejudices that may influence research outcomes. This practice ensures transparency and enhances reliability of findings by providing a comprehensive understanding of study boundaries and potential biases (Ancker et al., 2021; Leko et al., 2021).

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses outside of researchers' control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). This study was limited by the sampling technique that I used to transfer findings. A second limitation of this study is that it relies on honesty and accuracy of participants and their supporting documentation to accurately identify supply chain and logistics managers who implemented RM program. This could lead to biased results if participants are not truthful or documentation is inaccurate; incorrect or incomplete documentation and untruthful responses from participants can lead to biases involving research findings.

Delimitations

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope and define boundaries so that researcher objectives are possible to achieve (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). This study took place in the Midwest United States .

Significance of the Study

Findings from my proposed study may lead to additional information and a deeper understanding of how adequate RM strategies and processes may improve cross-functional activities and business performance as well as product returns. A well-executed RM system may positively impact e-tailers or retail manufacturers' funding by improving customer retention and reducing operational costs (Ahsan & Rahman, 2022). Gaining insights regarding developing and implementing adequate RM strategies and processes may prove valuable for retail businesses. RM strategies may enhance efficiencies of retail organizations' business activities.

Contribution to Business Practice

Supply chain and logistics leaders frequently do not understand or realize the value of RM; thus, they may not successfully implement RM strategies and processes (Chen et al., 2017). Findings may help supply chain and logistics managers implement RM programs to enhance supply chain efficiencies and improve product returns. As a result, they could see lower return rates, increased customer satisfaction, and reductions in return costs, which are essential to improving profitability (Röllecke et al., 2018).

Implications for Social Change

Retail organizations that adopt social change practices can benefit citizens, communities, and environments (Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2020). Using study findings, retail organizations may promote social change by reducing environmental problems through resource conservation and sustainability practices. This can include implementing energy-efficient technologies, reducing waste and packaging, and promoting environmentally-friendly products. Additionally, by reducing resource requirements, retail organizations may lower costs, benefiting both businesses and consumers. Retail organizations could also help communities by reducing environmental problems and lowering resource requirements (Wang et al., 2020). Retail organizations may prevent defective products from entering the market.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The study of RM from a managerial perspective is limited. I searched sources broadly across several disciplines, including electronic media, scholarly journal articles, and seminal textbooks.

I used the Walden University Library to evaluate RM. I explored articles published between 2002 and 2024 and used the following databases: ABI/INFORM Complete, SAGE Premier, ProQuest, Business Source Complete, ScholarWorks, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, and Emerald Management Journals. I used the literature review to analyze perceptions and perspectives about RM as a strategy for managing product returns more effectively and efficiently. The study contains 285 sources: 236 (83%) were peer-reviewed and published between 2019 and 2024, and four seminal textbooks. I used the following keywords: *returns management*, *supply chain management*, *reverse logistics and logistics management*, *leadership*, *strategic management*, *customer-centricity management*, *product returns management*, and *resource-based view theory*.

I aimed to understand RM strategies and processes that supply chain and logistics managers use to manage product returns. This included a holistic view of RM, practical tools to characterize basic features of RM, and platforms that provided further insights into developing a theory for RM.

The RBV theory is the conceptual framework for this study. Genchev et al. (2010) proposed by incorporating the RBV, firms may potentially strengthen their innovation capabilities and overall performance, leading to long-term competitive advantage. Huang et al. (2016) argued adopting an RBV approach can help firms better understand and leverage their unique resources and capabilities, leading to improved RM and sustained competitive advantage.

RBV

Based on the literature review, incorporating a comprehensive (RBV strategy can enhance RM, increasing companies' opportunities to gain a competitive advantage. I used RBV to assess organizations' decisions regarding integrating RM in my research. Applying the RBV theory, I evaluated whether integrating RM into firm operations may confer a competitive advantage. Rockwell (2019) indicated that the RBV theory could assist organizations in identifying and harnessing their distinctive resources to attain and maintain a competitive advantage. Huang et al. (2016) asserted the RBV theory can enhance RM programs.

RM is a pivotal facet of any business, necessitating a comprehensive approach to handle product returns effectively. Bentamar et al. (2021) determined companies that embrace the RBV perspective can attain a sustainable competitive advantage by cultivating the aptitude to oversee the reverse flow of goods. Barney (1991) noted that a company's internal resources and capabilities are primary wellsprings of competitive edge. Companies can realize a competitive advantage by capitalizing on distinctive resources and abilities to maintain sustained competitive superiority (Bentamar et al., 2021).

Supply chain and logistics leaders may assist companies in attaining a sustainable competitive advantage by developing distinctive resources and capabilities. Assensoh-Kodua (2019) noted the RBV theory is grounded in the notion that competitive advantage hinges primarily on resources, abilities, and competencies. Effectively managing these resources may enable firms to secure a competitive edge. Assensoh-Kodua indicated that

the RBV theory emphasizes internal assets, such as capabilities, resources, and competencies, as pivotal elements in achieving and sustaining competitive superiority. Barney and Clark (2007) expressed that the core objective of the RBV is to pinpoint unique resources and abilities that differentiate organizations from their competitors.

Using the RBV theory, firms may position themselves more effectively in their respective industries and achieve long-term success. This approach is essential for achieving competitiveness and gaining a distinct advantage in the market. Bentamar et al. (2021) asserted companies should proactively acquire new resources, upgrade existing ones, and adapt to emerging technologies and market trends. Assensoh-Kodua (2019) suggested focusing on the firm's internal resources, abilities, and competencies may lead to increased profits and superior performance. Bentamar et al. (2021) stated adopting the RBV theory can improve company resources and abilities, ultimately sustaining their competitive advantage.

Researchers may develop resources and capabilities using the RBV theory. Bentamar et al. (2021) stated the RBV is a guiding framework for resource allocation. Huang et al. (2016) argued companies can employ RBV strategies to identify and use their unique and valuable resources effectively. Enhancing capabilities involving managing returns may strengthen fundamental business strategies. Huang et al. proposed companies apply RBV strategies to determine unique resources and use them to enhance RM processes and improve their core business strategies.. Gibson et al. (2021) emphasized the RBV theory enables organizations to gain insights regarding how their strategic resources underpin their competitive advantage. Freeman et al. (2021) stated the

RBV theory assists organizations in achieving sustainable competitive advantages and expanding their resources. Supply chain and logistics managers who use the RBV theory are better equipped to comprehend how productive resources support organizational strategies (Collins, 2021).

To maintain relevance in respective markets, organizations may harness the RBV theory to enhance strategic management practices effectively. Bentamar et al. (2021) argued the RBV theory enables organizations to navigate competitive environments adeptly, bolstering their competitiveness, flexibility, and overall performance. Bag and Gupta (2020) noted employing the RBV theory in strategic decision-making is instrumental in achieving sustained competitiveness. Shan et al. (2019) acknowledged supply chain and logistics managers can leverage the RBV theory to determine resources that support long-term sustainability. Rockwell (2019) expressed the RBV theory is for organizations to attain and uphold a competitive advantage while enhancing their goals and objectives.

Companies that acknowledge the RBV theory may enhance their competitiveness. Barney and Clark (2007) asserted the RBV theory is pertinent when developing resources to sustain a competitive advantage. B. Bayon and Aguilera (2021) indicated the RBV theory is a valuable tool for managers to identify and effectively manage resources, ultimately leading to enhanced performance and long-term success for companies. The RBV theory can seamlessly complement RM practices by offering a structured framework for comprehending internal resources and capabilities (Huang et al., 2016).

RM

RM is a critical aspect of supply chain operations, as it involves efficiently handling product returns to recover value or appropriately disposing of returned items (Mai et al., 2012). Chen et al. (2019) stated the RM process encompasses essential activities required to manage the return of goods from customers. Rogers et al. (2002) stated RM was an integral component of the supply chain that requires planning and effective implementation. Patale and Zohair (2023) emphasized effective RM can promote sustainability and enhance business operations. Effective RM may help companies to improve customer satisfaction and operational efficiency.

Managers who implement RM strategies contribute to developing effective environmental practices that benefit the planet and improve financial performance (Patale & Zohair, 2023). The RM process has strategic significance in various economic sectors (de Araújo et al., 2018).

In contemporary business management, it is imperative to recognize the pivotal role RM plays as a multifaceted operational strategy. RM constitutes a strategic imperative, given its capacity to profoundly impact cost reduction and furnish businesses with a competitive edge (de Araújo et al., 2018). Chen et al. (2017) indicated RM could play an essential role in retail and e-commerce business environments as a strategic approach to creating value, managing returns, reducing costs, and improving business operations. Röllecke et al. (2018) stated companies with well-aligned RM integrated into organizational strategies are the foundation for effectively shaping behavior toward RM.

Companies implementing RM into their business strategies could improve product returns, provide sophisticated methods and tools to mitigate environmental waste and lead organizations to enhanced sustainability (Patale & Zohair, 2023). Integrating RM practices into supply chain and logistics operations is a strategic move for companies and provides a competitive edge in thriving markets. Well-implemented RM programs may positively impact businesses that enhance economic growth (Agrawal & Singh, 2020; Chen et al., 2017; Mollenkopf et al., 2007).

Frei et al. (2020a) stated some organizations lack strategic approaches to improving product returns, which may cause a significant reduction in revenues and profits while adding a substantial burden to expenses. RM may play a crucial role in e-commerce and retail operations. Business leaders of traditional and e-tail companies implementing structured RM frameworks may handle product returns effectively.

De Araújo et al. (2018) stated to ensure RM is practical; organizations must understand the implications of formalization that can foster effective ways for organizations to control operations during the RM process. Gibson et al. (2019) indicated formalization could involve clarifying roles and responsibilities between individuals and defining boundaries that effectively shape behaviors, guide actions, and delimit work activities. De Araújo et al. (2018) stated formalization is an efficient and effective way for organizations to understand their corporate activities better as well as RM through rules, regulations, policies, and procedures. Formalized systems are essential for coordinating materials and resources for supply chain and logistics managers. Alarcón et

al. (2021) stated practical formalization may be a valuable tool for firms to enhance performance, reduce uncertainty, and clarify priorities.

Businesses that invest resources like data analytics and customer feedback could help optimize their RM processes. Xu and Jackson (2019) reported organizations could gain helpful information through return processes to understand their customers better. Organizations that understand the intentions and behaviors of customers are more likely to develop effective RM that will help manage their return operations, reduce costs, and optimize the return process (De Borba et al., 2021; Xu & Jackson, 2019). Supply chain and logistics managers who successfully handle product returns may improve customer value and control product return costs more effectively. Robertson et al. (2020) noted by developing a strategic approach to learning consumer behavior, organizations better understand circumstances and what contributes to customers' reasons for returning their merchandise.

Integrating RM provides supply chain/logistics managers with a practical approach to creating strategies and processes that could help improve product returns and enhance logistics and supply chain operations. An RM can strengthen supply chain and logistics processes and prevent losing value from returns (Chen et al., 2017; Rogers et al., 2002). Organizations will see improved revenue sales by implementing an RM, reducing returns' adverse effects, and increasing profitability (Röllecke et al., 2018). By incorporating adequate returns management strategies, firms can improve and maintain their position in an increasingly competitive environment (Röllecke et al., 2018). Firms should invest in practical employee training to incorporate adequate returns management

strategies. Röllecke et al. (2018) identified three key strategies companies can adopt when developing a returns management program: an aligned strategy, validated learning, and an empowered organization. Karlsson et al. (2023) indicated that understanding the components of returns management that need to be well-thought-out may assist managers in establishing adequate returns management strategies, thereby emphasizing its significance as a material factor for managerial contemplation.

RMS

RMS are approaches and practices businesses can employ to handle product returns effectively. Hjort et al. (2019) expressed that the management strategies and implementation approaches for handling product returns within RMS vary based on the nature of the returned product, which requires different types of returned products and may necessitate specific processes within the RMS, thus demanding distinct strategies for effective management. Meanwhile, Karlsson et al. (2023) underscored a key factor hindering firms from achieving their strategic goals: the absence of alignment among crucial functions, such as marketing and operations. In this context, Hjort et al. (2019) stress the importance of prioritizing returns management but caution that without an RMS that aligns with the broader business strategy, it may result in a fragmented set of activities and a lack of coordination across various organizational components and the returns process. Hjort et al. (2019) and Karlsson et al. (2023) define alignment as the ability to formulate consistent strategies collaboratively.

Karlsson et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of effectively managing returns in retail businesses. Additionally, Patale and Zohair (2023) highlighted that RMS is a

crucial operation among these operational processes, particularly when considering sustainability factors. Karlsson et al. (2023) stress retailers need to develop and implement effective strategies for handling returns. Karlsson et al. (2023) and Patale and Zohair (2023) agree returns are not a simple process but an operational strategy. Chen et al. (2017) further supported this perspective by underscoring that forward-thinking businesses actively embrace thoughtful and focused management of their return processes. Chen et al. (2017) argue this strategy revolves around recognizing the pivotal role of returns in the broader business landscape and leveraging this awareness to minimize losses while transforming returns into a sustainable advantage. Karlsson et al. (2023) also draw attention to the fact that while existing literature provides valuable insights into the returns management process, there is still a need for a deeper understanding of the strategic interconnections among its pivotal components and the path to achieving successful returns management.

Developing a strategic approach focused on managing product returns may profoundly impact a company's overall success and competitive position. Karlsson et al. (2023) discussed how aligning an RMS with the overarching business strategy sustains adequate returns management practices, making it a pivotal mechanism in formulating an efficacious RM. Furthermore, Hjort et al. (2019) emphasized the critical importance of setting clear objectives and strategies for returns management during the design and implementation stages. Karlsson et al. (2023) and Hjort et al. (2019) found a well-defined returns management strategy is essential for achieving organizational goals.

Mollenkopf et al. (2011) underscore the critical importance of effective collaboration between marketing and manufacturing functions within businesses; as a result, when these two essential components fail to align their strategies and efforts, it can impede the organization's ability to achieve its strategic objectives.

Karlsson et al. (2023) and Mollenkopf et al. (2011) noted a strategic approach to returns management is essential for overall business success and competitiveness. Companies struggling to align their marketing and operations processes may risk achieving their strategic objectives. Mollenkopf et al. (2011) found aligning operational capabilities enables firms to meet marketing objectives effectively, including demand generation and customer retention. Chen et al. (2019) and Hjort et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of aligning the RMS with the overall business strategy. Hjort et al. (2019) highlighted the substantial benefits and value created by this alignment. Effective management of business processes is crucial for organizational productivity and efficiency. However, a poorly defined RMS that lacks alignment with the overall business strategy can lead to fragmentation (Hjort et al., 2019). RMS misalignment is a complex issue influenced by technological advancements, changing customer behaviors, emerging practices, and dynamic organizational environments (Karlsson et al., 2023). Failure to align can result in disjointed activities and impact the returns process. To address this, retailers should understand the interplay of these activities, their effect on RMS, and the overall value proposition (Hjort et al., 2019). Recognizing these connections may enable businesses to navigate returns challenges, optimize RMS, and enhance the customer experience. Chen et al. (2019) emphasized the critical importance

of a profound understanding of returns management as a strategic asset of utmost significance.

Chen et al. (2019) emphasize this knowledge forms an indispensable cornerstone for effectively tackling challenges and cultivating robust RMS. Chen et al. (2019) discerned that employees who acquire the necessary skills and expertise in returns management can profoundly elevate performance. Patale and Zohair (2019) posit proficient returns management is a pivotal catalyst for augmenting a company's visibility and profitability, all while thoughtfully managing costs. Karlsson et al. (2023) highlighted retailers and e-commerce businesses need to formulate and implement an effective RMS that harmonizes seamlessly with their overarching business objectives and the ever-evolving expectations of their customer base.

The presence or absence of a compelling RMS can impact a company's overall performance and reputation. Patale and Zohair (2023) discovered although performance metrics for handling returns have been well-defined in various industries, there is still room for improvement in evaluating returns management performance, particularly within the e-commerce sector. Consequently, establishing a robust system for managing product returns is critical to sustainable growth. Chen et al. (2019) stressed the importance of returns management performance in shaping a company's efforts to develop its employees, ultimately leading to enhanced returns management.

Effective leadership is crucial in developing and implementing returns management processes to manage product returns. Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) noted that an organization's success hinges on its leadership's competence in guiding the company

to meet its expectations, achieve its organizational goals, and enhance its competitive edge. Megheirkouni and Mejheirkouni (2020) assured leadership development can assist these organizations by furnishing their leaders with the essential skills to address their challenges. Klapalová (2019) noted ineffectual management techniques could impact business operations and diminish profitability. Chen et al. (2019) indicated proficient leadership is pivotal in implementing returns management strategies and processes as a strategic approach to managing product returns. By prioritizing a comprehensive understanding of leadership strategy, leaders can adeptly navigate the complexities of aligning organizational efforts with overarching goals (Adoli & Kilika, 2020).

RM Leadership

Strong leadership in returns management may improve operational efficiency and effectiveness for handling product returns within a business. De Araújo et al. (2018) stressed management failures have caused a spike in product returns, causing a revenue deficit for firms. Hjort et al. (2019) indicated returns management provides opportunities for supply chain/logistics managers to facilitate an efficient and effective way to improve product returns. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) stressed managing product returns is critical for supply chain/logistics professionals. Röllecke et al. (2018) expressed senior management plays a specific role in implementing returns management strategies and processes for organizations to improve product returns.

The leadership of supply chain/logistics managers is crucial when optimizing returns management. Creating a returns management program will require management to design effective strategies and processes (de Araújo et al., 2018; Röllecke et al., 2018).

Rogers et al. (2002) indicated that a returns management program enables supply chain/logistics leadership to improve product returns efficiently, identify opportunities to reduce unwanted returns and control reusable assets. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) stated managing product returns has been challenging for most management teams, who have yet to improve product returns effectively.

Supply chain/logistics managers may better control product returns if they are willing to develop practical skills and knowledge of returns management. Gupta and Singh (2020) indicated supply chain/logistics managers may manage product returns effectively by implementing efficient returns management strategies. Chen et al. (2017) and Karlsson et al. (2023) discussed how effective leadership ensures that returns management programs align with organizational goals. Chen et al. (2019) clarified management teams capable of generating and disseminating valuable knowledge about returns management are more likely to help the organization manage product returns.

Leadership should establish practical objectives to guide the organization in developing strategies and processes to manage product returns effectively. Failure to manage product returns may significantly affect various aspects of a company's operations, decreasing revenue (De Araújo et al., 2018). Hjort et al. (2019) and Röllecke et al. (2018) expressed returns management is a critical aspect of the supply chain and customer experience, and insufficient knowledge in this area can lead to various issues that hinder the development of adequate returns management programs. Mollenkopf et al. (2007) stressed returns management is a strategic approach that logistics and supply chain/logistics managers can apply to manage product returns and maximize their

customers' value. Incorporating returns management into a comprehensive supply chain and logistics strategy may aid managers in delivering value to customers.

Frei et al. (2020a) emphasized the importance of senior supply chain/logistics managers supporting a returns management program. Hjort et al. (2019) and Karlsson et al. (2023) underscored a practical and straightforward returns management program necessitates careful planning and alignment with senior management's goals and strategies. Röllecke et al. (2018) highlighted senior management's need to possess specific practical skills to effectively implement returns management operational functions. Leadership skills represent a critical asset that can enable supply chain/logistics managers to adapt to changing circumstances and implement a returns management program effectively. Due to ineffective management practices, organizations lose significant revenues from returns and increase operational costs (Shehu et al., 2020).

Managers who cultivate an innovative environment are more likely to boost the organization's economic performance (Espinosa et al., 2021). Leadership plays a vital role in shaping the organization's behaviors and motivating employees to contribute insight into the organization's goals and objectives (Bui et al., 2021). Leadership skills are essential when overseeing an organization's operations; making thoughtful decisions about the organizational goals and objectives that guide the company toward achieving its goals requires impeccable leadership. Abdullahi et al. (2020) conveyed to thrive in a competitive environment; leaders must be astute in providing effective leadership that improves organizational performance. Azadegan et al. (2021) stated that choosing the

right leadership style that best ensures effectiveness at each level is ambiguous. Le and Nham (2021) indicated that selecting a leadership style to address business problems requires a leader to possess knowledge of various leadership techniques and be able to adapt those techniques to the specific situation. Influential leaders have a toolbox of leadership techniques and can adjust them to business problems and situations.

Effective leadership involves ongoing skill development and fostering a culture of learning. Fontoura and Coelho (2020) conveyed organizations that embrace a transformational leadership approach fundamentally enhance relationships. Bui et al. (2021) emphasized leadership style boosts motivation, morale, and performance, particularly in fiercely competitive environments. Conversely, transactional leadership emphasizes the pursuit of self-interest by managers and employees to ensure alignment with organizational objectives and goals (Jacobsen et al., 2022). Moreover, according to Frei et al. (2020a), investment in innovations can prove invaluable for supply chain and logistics executives seeking to grapple with the challenges posed by increasing product returns, offering insights into potential solutions.

Leadership plays a crucial role in alignment with organizational business strategies. Othman et al. (2019) underscores the substantial impact of leadership on workforce satisfaction and overall productivity within an organization. Moreover, findings from studies by Röllecke et al. (2018) emphasize the pivotal responsibility of senior management in designing and executing efficient returns management strategies and processes. Cakir and Adiguzel (2020) indicated the success of an organization depends on the ability of leadership knowledge and skills to lead the organization in

meeting its expectations, achieving its organizational objectives, and increasing its competitive advantage. Kang (2020) and Megheirkouni and Mejheirkouni (2020) posed organizations must consider incorporating leadership development programs that motivate and train leaders at every level of the organizational structure and provide employees with the tools necessary to deal with customers effectively.

Effective integration of returns management into business operations requires management support. Chen et al. (2019) emphasized the critical role of leadership training in enhancing return management competency, enabling organizations to compete in their respective markets effectively. Without upper management's involvement, returns management initiatives risk becoming irrelevant (Chen et al., 2017). Hunt and Fedynich (2019) underscore the importance of fostering strong relationships between leaders and subordinates. An adequate returns management training program may help supply chain/logistics leaders make better decisions on managing product returns. Consequently, a leadership orientation program tailored to returns management can enhance leadership competency and contribute to organizational success in competitive markets (Chen et al., 2019).

Leadership development is a planned strategic approach to developing practical managerial skills, fundamentally designed to help the business gain a competitive advantage and improve organizational performance. Some companies have failed due to incompetent leadership; therefore, incorporating leadership development programs to develop leadership competencies could further the companies' objectives (Ahsan & Rahman, 2022). Chen et al. (2019) proposed that implementing a returns management

orientation program can equip managers with the necessary practical skills to oversee returns management operations effectively. Chen et al. (2019) argued such a program may also be pivotal in nurturing managers' leadership abilities to manage returns management operations efficiently. An orientation program focused on returns management can efficiently train employees to handle product returns. The orientation of returns management can directly impact how a company commits and allocates its resources, encompassing technological, managerial, and financial resources for returns management (Chen et al., 2019). Investment in an employee development program should be fundamental for an organization to accomplish its goals (Moreira et al., 2020). Investing in an employee development program is not just an expense but an investment in the future success and sustainability of the organization (Moreira et al., 2020). Chen et al. (2019) suggested companies must allocate resources to implementing new technologies and processes and train and develop their employees to effectively address the issues of managing returns. Retail and e-tail businesses that incorporate returns management orientation approaches into their business objectives can develop strategies and establish processes explicitly to handle returns effectively (Chen et al., 2017). A thorough understanding of returns management is crucial, and effective training programs dedicated to returns management offer practical solutions for efficiently handling product returns. Röllecke et al. (2018) indicated a successful returns management program relies on personnel skilled in planning, implementing, and improving the program to align the company's strategy with efforts to promote a culture of feedback and innovative thinking.

RMO

A returns management orientation (RMO) program assists companies in developing effective strategies and processes for handling returns that may contribute to their overall success and competitiveness. Companies implementing such programs are more inclined to participate actively in strategic and tactical return management activities (Chen et al., 2017). When organizations introduce returns management orientation programs, it becomes easier to assimilate the essential knowledge needed for improving competence, performance, innovation, and practical skills to manage returns (Chen et al., 2019). By doing this, organizations may benefit from enhanced returns management and gain the necessary skills and knowledge to manage a returns program effectively.

Organizations implementing an employee development program to enhance knowledge, skills, and abilities may significantly improve organizational performance (Chen et al., 2019). Such a well-executed training program contributes to achieving strategic objectives and fosters a conducive learning environment, which is instrumental in improving returns management and creating strategic opportunities (Chen et al., 2019; Ritola et al., 2022; Rogers et al., 2002). In supply chain/logistics leadership, it is imperative to establish a structured framework for learning governance, ensuring seamless teamwork (Ritola et al., 2022). Developing practical training programs must align harmoniously with the company's broader business goals and aspirations. Companies investing in a well-developed returns management orientation program can devise effective strategic and tactical methods to improve their returns management performances (Chen et al., 2019).

A structured learning program is crucial for empowering employees to gain specialized knowledge on returns management. Proactive learning is vital in organizations designing and implementing such programs (Chen et al., 2019). According to Assensoh-Kodua (2019), for organizations to succeed in this endeavor, they must cultivate confidence, prioritize knowledge creation, and foster an innovative culture that encourages learning, teaching, and sharing knowledge. Röllecke et al. (2018) emphasized that organizations require talented employees who can plan, execute, and enhance a robust returns management program. Well-designed training initiatives enhance skills and foster a supportive environment to motivate employees to strive for sustained competitive advantages.

Managers who create a collaborative and innovative work environment can enhance their environmental and economic performance more effectively than those who do not prioritize these aspects (Espinosa et al., 2021). Knowledge creation facilitates innovation, which, in turn, improves organizational performance and enhances managerial skills (Barua, 2021). The importance of knowledge creation is evident in its impact on organizational culture, leadership, and the work environment (Assensoh-Kodua, 2019). Knowledge creation is a tool that involves collaborating with individuals to develop innovative methods for enhancing an organization's competitiveness. When organizations foster a learning-oriented environment, they encourage employees to align more closely with their objectives and goals (Sayyadi, 2019). By integrating a knowledge-based approach into their core values, organizations establish a strong foundation that enables the creation of sustainable solutions that may maximize

profitability and competitive advantage. In contrast, mishandling knowledge can result in insufficient skills, leading to inadequate business goals (Bashir & Farooq, 2019). Organizations can use knowledge to achieve and sustain competitiveness (Durst & Zieba, 2019).

Organizations can tackle performance challenges within this strategy by cultivating internal expertise that fuels innovation and growth. External knowledge can help organizations improve their learning processes when they lack specific skills (Gaimon & Ramachandran, 2021). Encouraging knowledge sharing is imperative for fostering a practical approach to skill-building within the organization (Ghahroudi et al., 2019). Creating an adequate RMO program within a company's supply chain should align with the overall strategic objectives. Organizational learning capability encourages learning and cultivates new approaches that promote a learning environment where people learn together (Migdadi, 2021). However, organizations should be mindful of potential knowledge-related risks that may have significant consequences (Durst & Zieba, 2019).

Introducing an RMO program within an organization creates a conducive learning environment. Organizations that establish a knowledge infrastructure tailored to their business model may enhance outcomes, allowing organizations to collect and integrate pertinent data into their systems (Ritola et al., 2022). Therefore, adding an RMO program could boost supply chain/logistics professionals' competency in returns management (Chen et al., 2019).

Proper management training in returns management could help businesses more effectively reduce product returns. Organizations looking to remain relevant in their markets must create a culture that promotes organizational learning and develops managerial skills to enhance business operations (Kim & Park, 2020).

Companies that integrate a skill development program into business operations create a learning environment for building practical managerial skills to manage returns management programs effectively (Chen et al., 2019). A skill development program can help managers develop practical managerial skills to manage returns management operations effectively; problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and leadership are essential for adequate returns management operations (Chen et al., 2019). By implementing a skill development program, businesses may enhance their operations.

RMTS

An RMTS system may help managers process product returns more efficiently and manageably. Today's information technology is imperative to advancing a returns management program (Munizu et al., 2019). Implementing software solutions can address these challenges and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of returns management programs (Chen et al., 2016). Companies that utilize efficient and effective information technology systems can enhance their returns management program in several ways to help reduce costs, improve customer satisfaction, and increase efficiency (Chen et al., 2019).

Companies that implement information technology systems alongside their returns management programs are a significant benefit for managing their product

returns. Returns management is a complex and challenging process for most organizations; updating information technologies can help organizations manage their returns management program effectively (Chen et al., 2019). Product returns can significantly impact a company's bottom line; adding technology can improve returns management solutions and allow companies to use that data in business decisions. Information technology is a significant factor in designing a valuable returns management system (Chen et al., 2019). To foster employees' technology skills, firms must create an innovative environment to improve returns management capabilities and strengthen a firm's competitive advantage (García-Sánchez et al., 2019).

A well-defined returns management program supported by an effective RMTS system may help companies enhance operational efficiency. A firm must align its information technology with its overall strategies (Tanriverdi & Kui, 2020). An RMTS system can play a significant role in enhancing product returns by providing an opportunity to adopt a strategic approach that allows organizations to understand product returns and improve their strategies and processes accordingly (Ritola et al., 2022). Organizations can enhance profitability by sharing information about product returns that can positively impact an organization's performance and provide opportunities for developing innovations to improve product returns (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Companies that successfully integrate an RMTS system could maximize efficiency and enhance customer loyalty. An efficient returns management program requires an appropriate information system because an inadequate information system can reduce performance effectiveness and affect the value of customer feedback

information (Klapalová, 2019). Information technology is a crucial factor influencing returns management performance that improves logistics and supply chain management (Chen et al., 2019). Chae et al. (2018) also emphasized the significance of integrating an information system for effective returns management, highlighting its potential to enhance profits, boost productivity, and minimize business costs.

An RMTS system that is well-integrated and aligned with the organization's goals may enhance the core business structure. Managers who implement information technologies may improve the company's competitive advantage by boosting its customer base, reducing costs, and sustaining a position in the market (Xu, 2019). Moreover, advancements in information technology applications have become an opportunity for firms to improve competitiveness and business performance and enhance collaboration and integration among partners (Munizu et al., 2019). Effective communication can positively affect customer satisfaction and expand customer loyalty (Lysenko-Ryba & Zimon, 2021).

Information support is the backbone of an adequate returns management program. Excellent information support can be instrumental in developing a returns management program to better deal with returns, recovery, and reuse of products (Chen et al., 2019). Technology has helped some supply chain businesses improve their competitive advantage over competitors (Sheel & Nath 2019). The value of information technology in a competitive global market suggests firms need to implement risk management strategies that address uncertainties that can cause damage to the system (Samimi, 2020).

By incorporating effective technology solutions, companies can develop a digital platform that will meet the needs of their customers while unlocking new revenue streams, enhancing the company's competitive advantage over rivals. Organizations can use cloud computing to converge their information technology to improve business operational performance (Khayer et al., 2020). Attaran (2020) indicated organizations must embrace new technologies and cultivate a continuous adaptation and innovation culture within their information technology (IT) departments to maintain a competitive advantage. Organizations would benefit from developing a practical database that captures information and integrates it into algorithms that identify customers to create new marketing opportunities to target new customer segments (Röllecke et al., 2018).

A robust database system could reveal business opportunities for decision-making and solutions. Chen et al. (2019) indicated an adequate information support system can be instrumental in developing a returns management program that helps organizations minimize product returns. Frei et al. (2022) revealed organizations can improve profits by investing in an efficient and effective IT system to help manage product returns. Kim et al. (2020) proposed to enhance information processing capabilities, organizations may sometimes use logistics service providers to help deal with large amounts of data created from the supply chain.

Organizations may gain a competitive advantage by incorporating logistics service providers to help manage and process their data. Lyu et al. (2019) implied today's information technology infrastructure linked to other platforms supports organizations and generates superior collaboration with colleagues. Mitchell et al. (2019) indicated big

data, cloud computing, algorithms, and the Internet of Things (IoT) may improve supply chain structure, increase competitiveness, and optimize costs. Excellent information support may be instrumental in developing a returns management program to better deal with product returns (Chen et al., 2019).

Firms implementing RMTS systems may streamline their operations and enhance their ability to manage product returns. Information technology solutions facilitate supply chain activities and support business processes that improve operational performance (Ganbold et al., 2021). Organizations with an effective information technology system are more likely to sustainably manage their supply chain processes (Agrawal & Singh, 2020). A sound RMTS system could streamline returns management to handle product returns. The return management process concept is imperative to advancing information technology today (Munizu et al., 2019). Ritola et al. (2020) shared that product information may improve supply chain and reverse logistics operations.

RSCM

Returns management, often encompassed within the broader concept of reverse supply chain management (RSCM), is a critical process in today's business landscape. The primary objective of this intricate process is to redirect these products away from traditional disposal methods and instead channel them towards sustainable and environmentally responsible practices, such as recycling, remanufacturing, and reuse (Alarcón et al., 2021). Pushpamali et al. (2021) highlighted in their study that integration allows organizations to proactively address potential deficiencies in their strategic decision-making. However, this aspect can pose significant organizational challenges.

Adebayo (2022) has shown that reverse logistics can have adverse effects, such as negatively impacting customer relationships and potentially increasing reverse logistics costs. Therefore, businesses may benefit from carefully evaluating the consequences of returns management strategies and exploring innovative solutions to address any challenges. Karlsson et al. (2023) emphasize that in the field of return management, the processes involved in handling returned goods, both within and across various business functions. Implementing a returns management program within an organization's supply chain is about managing returns efficiently; it also plays a vital role in reducing waste and ensuring the proper disposal of unacceptable products. Mathiyazhagan et al. (2021) emphasize that such initiatives can positively impact environmental quality and contribute to building sustainability. Adequate disposal of unacceptable products is crucial as it ensures compliance with regulations and protects organizations from potential fines and penalties. It cultivates a responsible and sustainable business image that resonates with environmentally conscious consumers and like-minded partners (Mathiyazhagan et al., 2021). The development of practical strategies to minimize waste becomes paramount. Implementing practical strategies can simplify return processes and strengthen the supply chain to manage unexpected risks better and create a sustainable and environmentally friendly business environment (Moktadir et al., 2020). Organizations can extract maximum value from end-of-life or end-of-use products by adopting returns management practices. It maximizes resource efficiency and significantly reduces the quantity of waste destined for landfills, aligning with the principles of a circular economy (Mathiyazhagan et al., 2021).

By championing these practices, organizations can play a pivotal role in reducing waste in landfills, curbing their environmental footprint, and enhancing their sustainability performance. Reverse supply chain management offers incentives to customers and can lessen the volume of product returns for organizations struggling to boost profits while competing in their markets (Taleizadeh et al., 2020). Organizations can improve transportation, recycling, operations, disposal costs, and revenue with an efficient reverse supply chain network to increase profits (Ali et al., 2021; Ijuin et al., 2019). A reverse supply chain network also involves how organizations set up the transportation route, the number of products on each way, and the production volumes at each facility to minimize the total cost while maximizing the recycling rate of the whole network (Ijuin et al., 2019). RSCM can provide many benefits for organizations, including reducing waste, lowering costs, and increasing profits, which makes it a valuable tool for organizations looking to enhance their sustainability and competitiveness in the marketplace (Frei et al., 2020b). Transportation costs can significantly impact a company's bottom line; minimizing transportation costs can hopefully boost the company's bottom line (Harris et al., 2020).

Organizations with reverse logistics operations must deal with transportation costs that can drain the company's revenue; proper planning can decrease transportation costs. Organizations have become more aware of how reverse logistics practices improve business opportunities (Voigt et al., 2019). For example, by effectively managing the return of goods, organizations can reduce waste and minimize the environmental impact of their operations. Companies may sometimes experience higher costs due to the added

fees associated with using a third-party logistics (3PL) provider (Russo & Marsogo, 2019). However, these higher costs can sometimes be compensated for by the improved efficiency and effectiveness of the supply chain operations that the 3PL provides.

For example, a 3PL may have access to better transportation networks and advanced technology that can help streamline the logistics process and reduce overall costs (Russo & Marsogo, 2019). Moreover, it is essential for companies to meticulously evaluate their logistics needs and the services offered by 3PLs to determine if outsourcing to a 3PL will lead to cost savings or not. Reverse logistics strategies can minimize the impact and mitigate the risks of product returns (Panjehfouladgaran & Lim, 2020). To deal with product returns and reduce waste, having a strategic approach is a critical step toward dealing with product returns. A good logistics network can help an organization improve reverse logistics, such as collection, disassembly, recycling, remanufacturing, repairing, and disposal (Zarbakhshnia et al., 2020).

A closed-loop supply chain (CLSC) represents a model designed to minimize waste and enhance sustainability. Businesses can achieve this by establishing a closed loop where materials and resources are continuously recycled and repurposed, ensuring that waste generated in one stage becomes valuable input for another (Coenen et al., 2019). Implementing a closed-loop supply chain strategy holds significant promise for companies, offering a range of compelling benefits. Ritola et al. (2020) indicated sustainability and green business practices may bring numerous benefits when effectively implemented; these emerging value-adding practices include circular economy strategies, closed-loop supply chain management, and product returns management. Moreover,

adopting a closed-loop supply chain strategy may open new revenue streams as companies tap into the value of recycled materials, contributing to a more sustainable bottom line. Learning from closed-loop supply chain information offers a genuine advantage in comprehending the needs and desires of customers (Ritola et al., 2020).

CLSC Management

Closed-loop supply chain (CLSC) management involves designing and managing supply chain networks to minimize waste and promote resource efficiency. The focus is creating a closed loop where materials, products, and waste are captured, reused, and recycled efficiently and sustainably (Ritola et al., 2020). International organizations must introduce legislative mechanisms to alleviate carbon emissions (Mishra et al., 2020). Governments and consumers are concerned about how supply chain organizations implement strategies to reduce their carbon footprint and minimize waste from merchandise returned and the handling of recycling and disposal of end-of-life products (Song et al., 2020). Companies that provide logistics or reverse logistics services must devise measures to reduce their carbon footprint to achieve a sustainable supply chain. Supply chain organizations must tackle their carbon footprint and become more transparent with their social, environmental, and economic goals to stakeholders and consumers (Carter et al., 2020). Organizations implementing a CLSC orientation model deliver sustainable advantages for the organization and its customers (Zhou et al., 2021).

A comprehensive CLSC network is a practical solution a company can use to increase sustainability while reducing an organization's carbon footprint. A CLSC network can help organizations become more eco-friendly (Huang et al., 2020a).

Designing an effective CLSC will also improve the utilization of materials and enhance the supply chain's performance in coping with environmental impacts and cost control (Huang et al., 2020b). A CLSC practice can help organizations improve profitability while reducing product returns waste. Developing systemic and strategic processes leads organizations to address their supply chain while mitigating environmental issues and encouraging social change across the network (Mathiyazhagan et al., 2021). The closed-loop supply chain's function is reprocessed product returns for economic effectiveness (Khedlekar & Singh, 2019).

Educating the consumer about remanufactured products makes an organization more transparent. As a result, consumers may become more willing to buy and use remanufactured products, contributing to a more environmentally friendly society (Zhou et al., 2021). Supply chain organizations must adopt sustainability practices to lessen social-environmental problems (Panigrahi et al., 2019). Companies that develop robust CLSC solutions help prevent environmental dilapidation and sustain a competitive advantage in their markets. CLSC management is an approach that can increase performance and logistics processes following the requirements of environmental regulations (Song et al., 2020).

A CLSC management's main objectives are to minimize cost and optimize a sustainable supply chain to maximize profit and reduce expenditures (Mishra et al., 2020). CLSC solutions effectively prevent hazardous waste from entering the environment and help businesses become more eco-friendly by reducing waste from being dumped in landfills while optimizing revenue and boosting the company's bottom

line. According to Guo et al. (2020), using secondary markets to sell off excess inventory is common for organizations and increases total sales. By remanufacturing products, an organization can reduce product disposal and improve sustainability (Reimann et al., 2019). Organizations must educate supply chain/logistics managers to operate a closed-loop system (Bag & Gupta, 2020).

Practical training in operating closed-loop systems may enhance organizational sustainability. Managers can integrate organizational learning practices with CLSC practices to help organizations incrementally strengthen their understanding of product returns and use that information to make data-driven decisions (Ritola et al., 2022). Developing a framework for incremental organizational learning from product returns can help organizations understand their customers better, improve product quality and reliability, and drive continuous improvement (Ritola et al., 2022). By combining these two approaches, organizations may create a comprehensive framework for learning from product returns and develop targeted solutions that address the specific needs of their customers.

Firms working together can pool their resources, knowledge, and expertise to create new technologies and business models that support environmental sustainability (Bag & Gupta, 2020). Training programs on the adoption of ecological innovation are also essential for sustainability. These programs can help firms understand the latest technologies and best practices for reducing their environmental impact and equip employees with the skills and knowledge they need to adopt and implement these

innovations in the workplace (Bag & Gupta, 2020). Firms may leverage their learning and expertise to shift towards sustainable business practices.

CSLC management is essential to sustainable business practices and provides significant opportunities for companies to create value (Ritola et al., 2022). While implementing CLSC is challenging, the long-term benefits make it a worthwhile investment for businesses looking to stay ahead of competitors. Sustainability in the supply chain is becoming increasingly important for companies as consumers and stakeholders demand environmentally friendly and socially responsible business practices (Sehnem et al., 2019). Supply chains often strive to provide customers with the best possible combination of price and quality; however, determining the appropriate pricing policy in a competitive environment is a complex and multifaceted decision that depends on various factors (Shabbir et al., 2021). Supply chain managers must continuously monitor and adapt their pricing strategies to stay competitive, often requiring strategic planning.

SCM

In the realm of returns management, promoting transparency among supply chain management (SCM) companies is a critical cornerstone for developing successful strategies to address the prevalent challenges within the supply chain. Transparency empowers companies to manage reverse logistics proactively; product recalls and excess inventory management may lead to improved overall supply chain performance and a more sustainable and customer-centric approach (Brun et al., 2020). A fundamental problem plaguing many firms is the glaring absence of open communication, robust

information-sharing mechanisms, and a commitment to transparency, which is critical in fostering and maintaining consumers' trust (Brun et al., 2020). Centobelli et al. (2022) indicate in their research that many companies are incorporating these practices alongside emerging technologies to enhance the transparency and efficiency of their supply chains.

Supply chain partners play a critical role in enhancing the efficiency of a company's supply chain. Cultural differences within the supply chain can adversely affect the collaboration between supply chain partners (Nguyen et al., 2021). Integrating new technology is the future direction for organizations with global supply chain management; hence, it will significantly enhance SCM, improve customer demands, lower costs, and provide a better-quality product (Le et al., 2020). Companies that transform their supply chain may succeed in their markets. According to Saroha et al. (2020), numerous works have been done by academicians and researchers about a firm's sustainability using a green concept in their business practices. To be genuinely sustainable, supply chain/logistics professionals must perceive sustainability as a moral duty and have explicit goals/procedures to achieve such responsibility (Lee & Ha-Brookshire, 2020).

Companies that build and maintain alliances with supply chain partners may establish and sustain resilience in their market. Organizations with sustainability issues within supply chains must create effective processes and activities that improve sustainability (Saberi et al., 2019). Companies working toward achieving and maintaining sustainability must become transparent, cultivate a culture of sustainability, and appropriately handle risk to the supply chain (Mageto, 2021). A company must develop a

systematic approach to mitigate disruption to the supply chain (Kalaitzi et al., 2019). When there is no optimized returns program, companies may experience a disruption in the supply chain; integrating a returns management program may alleviate the risk to the supply chain. Organizations must incorporate strategies that adjust to changing markets in a competitive global environment (Min et al., 2019). Reducing costs to the supply chain is essential if an organization wants to maintain its competitiveness in the marketplace (Attaran, 2020). Organizations that effectively support their sustainable supply chain management will reduce operational costs, improve competitive advantage, and decrease environmental issues (Mageto, 2021).

A good returns management program may prove effective for companies seeking to improve costs and sustainability. Organizations need to have strategic approaches to reduce costs to the supply chain because supply chain cost reduction is a critical issue that can negatively impact productivity and profits (Attaran, 2020). Effective SCM helps organizations develop robust cultures, processes, and organizational structures that improve business performance (Min et al., 2019). For organizations to achieve sustainable goals, corporate culture is imperative to the process (Mageto, 2021).

Fostering corporate culture may strengthen the organization's goals and objectives. Organizations with a competitive advantage have implemented an effective supply chain process that enhances their relationships with upstream suppliers and downstream customers, improving organizational performance and customer satisfaction (Peng et al., 2020). Combining a logistics program with the supply chain process makes it easier for organizations to understand how the supply chain partners function to achieve a

collaborative objective (Kim et al., 2020). Huang et al. (2020b) indicated that collaborations between companies could take on many forms, from partnerships and joint ventures to strategic alliances and mergers and acquisitions.

Regardless of the type of collaboration, the goal is often to pool resources and expertise to achieve mutual benefits that would be difficult or impossible to achieve alone. Parast (2020) indicated a holistic view of the supply chain enables supply chain managers to identify areas for improvement. By fostering solid relationships with suppliers and other partners, supply chain managers can build a more resilient and adaptable supply chain that can respond to changes in demand and supply and disruptions in the supply chain (Parast, 2020). Identifying and assessing potential risks, developing mitigation plans, and continuously monitoring and responding to potential disruptions (Herden, 2020). Organizations may reduce the likelihood and impact of supply chain disruptions and ensure the continued success of their operations.

Effective management of supply chain risks is crucial for overall supply chain performance. González-Zapatero, et al. (2021) mention in their study that effective supply chain risk management is critical for ensuring the continuity of business operations and minimizing the negative impact of supply chain disruptions. In the supply chain designing and planning stage, a proactive approach can enhance the robustness of supply chains by identifying potential risks and vulnerabilities, developing mitigation strategies, and implementing measures to improve supply chain resilience (Xu et al., 2020b). Incorporating a returns management program may decrease supply chain process risks and enhance operational efficiency within the organization.

CCM

Businesses implementing customer-centric management (CCM) may enhance overall services, fostering strong relationships and retaining valuable customers (Azeem et al., 2022). By prioritizing the needs and wants of customers, businesses can improve their products and services, increase customer loyalty, and gain a competitive advantage in the global market (Mariano & Khan, 2019). Businesses continuously evolve to achieve a competitive advantage; therefore, the major challenge these organizations face is adopting innovative ways to improve business performance (Azeem et al., 2022; Medini et al., 2020).

Embracing customer-centric business strategies can play a crucial role for organizations seeking to be competitive. Customer-centric business strategies can strengthen an organization's customer relationships and enhance performance to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage (Azeem et al., 2022; Medini et al., 2020). Businesses can tailor their marketing strategies and communication efforts to engage and retain their customers effectively, leading to increased customer loyalty and profitability (Gupta & Ramachandran, 2021). Customer support is becoming essential to an organization; it can augment that exceptional customer support service leads customers to perceive the organization better (Sheth et al., 2020).

Companies that embrace customer-centricity should cultivate a culture that encourages everyone's primary focus to put the customer first. A returns management program can significantly influence customer-centric strategy (Röllecke et al., 2018). A returns management program ensures that customers can quickly return their products,

which may enhance their overall experience with the company. CCM maximizes organizational goals and improves customer satisfaction (Azeem et al., 2022; Medini, 2018; Medini et al., 2020). CCM places customers at the center of organizational activities and processes (Frank et al., 2020), calling for a more customer-centric perspective (Becker et al., 2020).

According to Yrjölä (2021), many executives lack customer-centric knowledge. Businesses strive to help customers meet their needs by adopting CCM as a strategic approach, which may empower companies to understand and address customer desires. Business leaders are more concerned about allocating resources to internal factors rather than customer preferences, making it challenging to define the organization's primary customers (Yrjölä, 2021). Top management is not concerned with elevating customer satisfaction regardless of the plethora of customer-centric information; their primary purpose is profits (Denning, 2022).

Effective leadership is essential to developing customer-centric strategies. A customer-centric business strategy is an innovative way to integrate end customers into the supply chain, allowing the customer to play a proactive role in the supply chain process (Martinelli & Tunisini, 2019). Customer-centric business strategies aim to improve customer satisfaction and loyalty while optimizing the supply chain efficiency and effectiveness (Martinelli & Tunisini, 2019). Customer centricity involves understanding customer preferences and behaviors and using that information to design products and services, marketing strategies, and other aspects of the business to meet and exceed customer expectations (Habel et al., 2020).

Customer centricity is well-defined, with customers' interests being the primary focus. An organization is responsible for developing a business culture that creates and retains customers (Sheth et al., 2020). CCM effectively serves customers better and sustains customer satisfaction and loyalty (Ullah et al., 2020). An organization can improve customer-centric performance through organizational learning and contribute to a competitive advantage through customer-centric approaches (Yuliansyah et al., 2021).

Leadership must be able to execute customer-centric; lacking knowledge of customer needs may lead to poor customer satisfaction. Organizations that learn from their customers can obtain deep customer insights to meet customer expectations (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). A customer-focused strategy may boost organizational performance by offering excellent services and innovative products to help maintain existing customers and attract new ones (Yuliansyah et al., 2021). Some customers feel that organizations are not concerned about their needs and that customer service people are just going through the motions (Packard & Berger, 2021). Integrating a customer-centric return program is a practical approach to increasing customer satisfaction while adding value to business operations.

CCM focuses on understanding and meeting the needs and expectations of customers, which may lead to increased customer satisfaction and loyalty. Training customer services to more active listeners and using concrete words to gather information about customer experience helps improve customer satisfaction (Packard & Berger, 2021). Analyzing product returns data may offer valuable insights into customer preferences and opinions.

PRM

Product returns significantly affect a business's profitability, often posing a challenge to business survival (Frei et al., 2020a). If a company does not handle returns properly, that process causes problems within its supply chain (Chen et al., 2017; de Araújo et al., 2018), and providing an efficient returns management system to address product returns issues leads to positive customer relationships and enhanced business profitability (Chen et al., 2017).

The significance of efficient product returns management (PRM) in business is essential, and several research studies have shed light on this matter. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) observed product returns are rising and pose a significant challenge for online retailers, suggesting that the problem of product returns is becoming increasingly important in the e-commerce industry. Ambilkar et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive study to understand better how to manage product returns effectively. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) and Ambilkar et al. (2021) proposed practical strategies to address this challenge, implying that there is a need for systematic approaches to handling returns.

Companies that apply a returns management system may efficiently and effectively handle product returns. Frei et al. (2022) noted many companies may lack adequate strategies to deal with the challenges posed by product returns. Saxena et al. (2022). highlighted the benefits of prioritizing and streamlining return processes. Karlsson et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of aligning customer preferences with a strategic framework and understanding the strategic implications of handling product returns.

The Internet has changed how goods and services are sold and distributed across various industries and sectors. Hjort et al. (2019) highlighted the increasing trend of consumers shopping online, with the e-commerce industry projected to achieve $5 trillion in sales by the year 2021. Hjort et al. (2019) suggested a significant shift in consumer behavior towards online shopping. Additionally, Ahsan and Rahman (2022) observed a substantial growth in trade volume within the United States, which increased from $1.67 trillion in 2015 to $3.53 trillion in 2019. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) also noted the growth attributed to the expansion of e-commerce businesses, especially as traditional brick-and-mortar retailers entered the online market, driving the total market value of e-commerce to $6.54 trillion by 2022. However, this rapid growth in e-commerce also has a downside. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) found a rise in product returns, with consumers returning about 30% of their online purchases. Ahsan and Rahman (2022) indicated research emphasized e-commerce businesses' difficulties when handling returns and highlighted the importance of developing effective strategies to tackle this problem.

Many companies may face significant financial challenges due to product returns. Chen et al. (2019) indicated that manufacturers spend approximately $16.7 billion annually on managing their product return processes, which amounts to 6% of their total revenues. Wang et al. (2021) revealed there has been a significant increase in the number of product returns within the electronics industry, reaching a staggering 27% rise. Cui et al. (2020) found a return surge can have severe consequences for companies in this sector, resulting in significant financial losses and disruptions to business operational efficiency that may impact a company's profitability.

Therefore, businesses must address these challenges effectively and find strategies to reduce product returns. Hjort et al. (2019) indicated when companies align their returns management practices with their overall business strategies, it can significantly improve the efficiency of handling product returns and reduce associated costs. Wang et al. (2021) highlighted the vital importance of establishing a structured returns program that is essential to business operations. Muir et al. (2019) emphasized the significance of clear and precise product descriptions and accurate images, asserting that these factors are critical in minimizing customer disappointment and may enhance overall customer satisfaction. These studies collectively suggest that aligning returns management with business strategies, implementing structured programs for efficient returns handling, and ensuring clear product descriptions and accurate images may improve customer satisfaction and overall business success.

Muir et al. (2019) emphasized companies may utilize predictive analytics and machine learning methods to identify and target customers who are more likely to return items effectively, resulting in businesses leveraging data-driven tools to understand better customer behavior related to returns. Robertson et al. (2020) discovered adequate returns management can benefit companies in two significant ways: first, it can help optimize sales by streamlining the return process, making it more efficient and customer-friendly, and second, it can reduce the costs associated with product returns, which can be a substantial financial burden for businesses. Another relevant point is that organizations have been using free shipping as both a promotional strategy and a permanent component of their returns policy, which, as indicated, means that some companies offer free return

shipping to incentivize customers to make purchases and return items with ease (Shehu et al., 2020).

Establishing a transparent and easily understandable return policy may benefit companies. Wang et al. (2020) found most organizations offer full-product returns to customers and that some companies may adopt a different approach by providing partial-product returns without imposing additional charges such as restocking fees. Li et al. (2021) suggested a money-back guarantee (MBG) policy can be a valuable tool for companies to attract new customers and enhance customer service, and to leverage this policy effectively, Companies must establish a transparent and easily understandable return policy. Different companies may adopt varying approaches, such as Wal-Mart, which provides a 90-day full refund policy, and Best Buy, which imposes a 15% restocking fee on product returns, to effectively implement their money-back guarantee policies (de Borba et al., 2021).

A transparent and fair money-back guarantee policy may positively affect a company's customer acquisition efforts and overall service quality. Rokonuzzaman et al. (2020) highlighted organizations that implement strict or rigorous return policies may unintentionally create a situation where customers find these policies inconsistent or unfair. Yu and Kim (2019) emphasized effective return policies can help organizations minimize the risks associated with product returns. Packard and Berger (2021) highlighted using clear and specific language in return policies can significantly enhance customer satisfaction. They suggest that a company could increase customer satisfaction by up to 9% simply by adopting precise and straightforward wording in its return

policies. Clear and well-structured policies may reduce confusion and disputes when customers want to return a product. Frei et al. (2020a) highlighted several reasons customers return products; one common reason is a change of mind, and another significant factor is fraudulent returns, which involve dishonestly exploiting the return and exchange system. Shih et al. (2021) indicated this issue has been particularly problematic for large organizations, with 82% experiencing a 10%-20% reduction in profits due to return fraud. Addressing fraud is an ongoing challenge, but implementing effective technology can help reduce fraudulent returns and increase a company's revenue (Shih et al., 2021). Companies often struggle to detect fraudulent activities, underscoring the importance of having robust return policies and employing effective technology to minimize fraudulent actions (Rintamäki et al., 2021). Furthermore, organizations may leverage their return policies to enhance customer satisfaction and bolster their competitive edge by implementing a returns management system. When creating a returns policy, organizations must consider which approach best fits a money-back guarantee (MBG) policy or no refunds or exchanges (Li et al., 2021).

Companies uncertain about what type of return policy will fit their company may need to evaluate their returns process; implementing a returns management program may reduce uncertainty about the best return policy that benefits customers and the company. Product returns are constantly increasing and becoming a critical challenge for the retail and e-commerce industries; as a result, these industries have not yet succeeded in effectively managing product returns (Ahsan & Rahman, 2022). Product returns have negatively affected sales worldwide, causing revenue to decline (Ahsan & Rahman,

2022). Effective PRM is crucial for maintaining customer satisfaction and ensuring long-term business success (Ahsan & Rahman, 2022). Supply chain/logistics managers may effectively manage product returns by acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to optimize the returns process.

Transition

In Section 1, I explored RM processes and strategies supply chain and logistics professionals use to improve product returns. Section 1 contains the study's foundational elements, including the problem statement, purpose statement, a description of the nature of the study, research and interview questions, and the conceptual framework.

Section 1 also contains operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The section ended with a discussion of the significance of the study and a comprehensive literature review. Section 2 discusses my proposed study and why I decided on the multiple case research design to explore what skills some supply chain and logistics managers use to develop and implement efficient and effective RM strategies and processes.

I discussed my role as the researcher, participants, method and design, ethical research, and population and sampling. I used interview questions to obtain meaningful information that may contribute to documenting strategies to manage reverse product flow. In Section 3, I present my findings after the preliminary review. I offer recommendations for action, explain the implications for social change, provide my reflections on the research process, and end with a concluding statement.

Section 2: The Project

In Section 2, I provide details about this research project. This section includes the purpose statement and thorough discussions of my role as the researcher, participants, research method, research design, population and sampling, ethical research, data collection instruments, data collection techniques, data organization techniques, data analysis procedures, and reliability and validity. Finally, I describe methods to ensure this study's credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

Purpose Statement

This proposed qualitative multiple case study involved exploring what skills some supply chain and logistics managers use to develop and implement efficient and effective RM strategies and processes. The targeted population is supply chain and logistics managers with 5 or more years working in the e-tail or retail manufacturing industry in the Midwest United States who effectively implemented RM strategies and processes that enhance customer satisfaction, reduce the financial impact of returns on businesses, and promote environmentally-responsible practices. This could enable e-tail and retail manufacturers to provide customers with reasonably-priced products, create safe workplaces for employees, and eliminate waste from entering the environment. In addition, companies can strategically partner with nonprofit organizations that directly work with communities facing pressing challenges, helping them to improve their lives and communities.

Role of the Researcher

Researchers must recognize their influence as a critical component of the research process and actively work to reduce any biases and errors that their involvement might introduce (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). In a qualitative study, the researcher acts as the instrument throughout the study (Goodman et al., 2020). In qualitative research, researchers play a central role in collecting and analyzing data. Yoon and Uliassi (2022) argued researchers are not merely observers but active participants in data collection, interpretation, and presentation processes. Qualitative researchers should acknowledge their biases and perspectives while employing rigorous methods to increase the reliability and credibility of their findings. To achieve this, they need to understand participants and context, and methods for analysis must be as accurate and thorough as possible to develop a rigorous qualitative research study (Nassaji, 2020). Achieving rigor in qualitative studies requires a deep understanding of participants and context and thorough data collection and analysis methods. Qualitative researchers strive to produce high-quality, robust, knowledgeable, and comprehensive studies that advance their respective fields and help address critical questions and challenges (Nassaji, 2020). As the researcher, I achieved a more holistic and nuanced understanding of participants and their context. Literature in qualitative research is rich data; detailed descriptions rely on ample and detailed data, with thick descriptions as a foundation for researchers to build their arguments (Moon, 2019).

Triangulation is one method that helps increase validity, reliability, and legitimacy of research findings in terms of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and

transferability (Moon, 2019). I used triangulation for my study to analyze a broader range of evidence, ensuring a comprehensive analysis. Moon (2019) explained distinct forms of triangulation are method triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation, and data source triangulation. I sought feedback from my committee to ensure my research was unbiased.

Researchers provide participants with detailed research information, obtain their consent, and apply methods for the study (Cumyn et al., 2019). The safety and wellbeing of participants is a top priority for researchers. The role of researchers is to protect participants from suffering harm and consider how they will benefit from the study (Cumyn et al., 2019). Lavee and Itzchakov (2023) claimed the literature review is indispensable in qualitative research for a comprehensive foundation to construct their arguments. The Belmont Report is essential when conducting research using human subjects and determining how to conduct honest and impartial research studies. According to White (2020), the Belmont Report involves providing appropriate moral guidance for researchers when involving human subjects.

The three core principles of the Belmont Report include respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The Belmont Report is the foundation for ethical research and is a landmark document.

The Belmont Report addresses new technology that may compromise transparency and risk participants' privacy and confidentiality (Friesen et al., 2017). Researchers must always protect participant privacy and prevent harm throughout the research process, including during recruitment and data collection. Researchers must

always carefully consider potential participant risks when obtaining informed consent from potential participants and using secure data storage and handling protocols. Risks can arise throughout all stages of research, mainly when recruiting participants (Friesen et al., 2017). I followed ethical guidelines and principles of the Belmont Report and Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) when conducting my study.

I approached the study with a keen awareness of potential compromises. My role in conducting this qualitative research involves employing systematic qualitative methods to explore my research question. Those entail selecting an appropriate research design, devising a data collection strategy, recruiting participants, collecting and analyzing data, and interpreting findings. Furthermore, I adhered to ethical principles and qualitative research guidelines, ensuring rigorous and ethical conduct. Nassaji (2020) indicated researchers must ensure their research is ethical and findings are transparent.

My interest in this study is related to my experiences working as a transportation semi-truck driver for a trucking company that provides logistics services to its customers. Although my study awareness is limited, my knowledge comes from 3 years of working in the trucking and logistics industry. My goal is to understand how RM programs improve product returns.

I conducted a qualitative research study to explore experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of individuals who participated in implementing a successful RM program to gain a deeper understanding of how these programs affect product returns. I used the semistructured interviewing technique process to gather data. I also created a data analysis plan using NVivo to identify patterns and themes within data. In addition, I

aimed to understand existing research on RM programs, identify gaps in literature, and develop my research question. I also followed ethical guidelines when conducting my study and ensured I obtained all required permissions and approvals from the Walden IRB before commencing my study. IRBs ensure safe, ethical, and consistent standardization of research involving human participants (Lapid et al., 2019).

Participants

Mozersky et al. (2020) noted participants are the foundation of the research in a qualitative study and place significant emphasis on the research process to ensure the audience selected fits the questions, eliciting meaningful responses from potential participants. Building rapport is essential in interviewing; to achieve this, researchers must be knowledgeable in asking open-ended questions that encourage conversation and genuine interest in the subject. The primary aim of building trust is to develop an atmosphere conducive for the participants to feel comfortable sharing their insights and experiences about the phenomenon (McGrath et al., 2019). To establish a relationship with potential participants, I explained the research study's purpose and provided them with some background information on why conducting this research study is essential. I used the icebreaker technique, which helps initiate and facilitate conversation, typically to make participants feel more comfortable and engaged. To build rapport, I can follow the tips that McGrath et al. (2019) suggested by preparing myself as an interviewer and considering the cultural and power dimensions of the interview situation. In addition, I can use active listening techniques, such as reflecting on what the participant has said, to show that I am interested in their perspective and value their input. I can also try to find

common ground with the participant, such as shared experiences or interests, to help establish a connection. These are some tips McGrath et al. (2019) suggested when interviewing participants for a research study. Recruitment of research participants takes many forms; it involves presenting potential participants with information about the research study before their participation to help establish interest and readiness to serve as research subjects. To produce a well-designed research study, researchers must explore participants' experiences and knowledge about the research question (Mozersky et al., 2020).

I plan to research supply chain/logistics managers in e-tail companies, or the retail manufacturers industry headquartered in the Midwest region of the United States. For potential participants to meet eligibility requirements for this proposed research study, the supply chain/logistics manager must be able to provide specifics about developing and implementing returns management strategies and processes into their supply chain/logistics operations. I used the purposive snowball sampling technique to find and select potential participants that yielded relevant and valuable information.

I sought approval for my proposed research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. I accessed potential participants for my research study through emails, letters, or phone calls. As a researcher, ethical responsibility was crucial. Following academic ethical guidelines, I informed potential participants about the interview process and whether I would provide remunerations for their participation. I also explained to potential participants that they would not face any consequences if they decided to withdraw from the interview. Before proceeding with the investigation, I

obtained the consent of participants to participate in my proposed research study. Although using university review boards (IRBs) aids the researcher, my responsibility remained to mitigate the risk of inadvertent effects (Azzari & Baker, 2020). My IRB approval number is 10-25-23-0032564.

Research Method and Design

Research methodology refers to the process and strategy used to conduct research (Walliman, 2021). The methodology includes the methods, techniques, and procedures used to gather and analyze data. Research design is a plan or blueprint for conducting research, including the practices and procedures used to collect and interpret data. Research methodology and design refer to the systematic approach researchers use to conduct their studies, formulate problems and objectives, and collect and analyze data to produce results that contribute to knowledge in a particular field (Sileyew, 2019). Research methodology and design provide the overall structure and plan for conducting a research study. The methodology helps to ensure that the research study is consistent and accurate and that the data collected are valid and reliable. Different research methods and designs are better suited to answer additional research questions and collect various data types (Sileyew, 2019).

Research Method

My three potential research methodologies are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Researchers must consider the strengths and limitations of each methodology and choose the most appropriate approach for their research question and objectives. In addition, researchers must carefully plan their study design, data collection methods, and

analysis techniques to ensure that their research is valid, reliable, and ethical (Queirós et al., 2017). To reach a rigorous and credible analysis in qualitative research, the researcher must generate a decisive research design and engage in thorough qualitative practices (Holmlund et al., 2020). I selected the qualitative approach and adopted a multiple case study design to explore how supply chain/logistics managers develop and implement returns management strategies and processes to manage product returns effectively and efficiently. Using a qualitative research method allows researchers to focus on experiences and processes, emphasizing context and understanding the attitudes, behavior, and motivations from the participants' viewpoint (Hollin et al., 2020).

In some cases, researchers may engage participants to help create the research question and design and engage participants for data collection and analysis (Levitt et al., 2021). A multiple-case research design broadens the scope beyond single-case analysis, facilitating the exploration of the differences and similarities between cases. Conversely, this approach helps researchers address their research questions by delving deeper into participant perspectives on phenomena, going beyond mere quantitative statistics (Hunziker & Blankenagel, 2021). The qualitative methodology helps the researcher produce in-depth and explanatory information to understand the various dimensions of the problem (Queirós et al., 2017). Lester et al. (2020) found qualitative research methods could provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon or situation, allowing the researcher to explore and describe complex, nuanced, and context phenomena.

Qualitative researchers need to be particularly vigilant about their own biases and assumptions. Levitt et al. (2021) proposed researchers must be mindful of their biases and

transparent about their research framework. By helping ensure the data analysis is rigorous and unbiased (Johnson et al., 2020). I used a qualitative methodology for my proposed research study to understand better, from a managerial perspective, what returns management strategies and processes are used to manage product returns effectively and efficiently. According to Queirós et al. (2017), a qualitative methodology is a research approach that involves collecting and analyzing nonnumerical data, such as text, images, and audio recordings, exploring complex social phenomena, and understanding the perspectives and experiences of the people involved. On the contrary, researchers use the quantitative methodology to evaluate the hypothesis and the relationships between dependent and independent variables by drawing a representative sample of participants from a known population, measuring the variables, and testing them using statistical analyses (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019).

Mixed methods research, on the other hand, combines quantitative and qualitative research methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research question by collecting numerical data and rich, detailed information from interviews and observations. Khalid (2017) explained the mixed method combines quantitative and qualitative approaches because the data provides a core understanding of the problem while addressing the study's weaknesses. Quantitative and mixed methods are two excellent research approaches for a research study. However, I did not select the mixed or quantitative methodologies for my proposed research study because my research does not require quantitative methods.

I selected the qualitative methodology to conduct my research study because qualitative research methods are instrumental in exploring complex, subjective phenomena that cannot be easily quantified or measured. Alam (2021a) stated qualitative research is a method that seeks to understand and interpret human behavior, experiences, and social phenomena through nonnumerical data such as observations, interviews, and written or visual materials. I selected the multiple case study design because this approach is appropriate when the research question requires an in-depth exploration of a phenomenon in real-life contexts. Finally, the qualitative research method and multiple case study design enable researchers to explore what, why, and how questions more broadly, descriptively, and extensively about a problem (Alam 2021b).

Research Design

The research design is the strategy for conducting a research study; it includes the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze data and the overall structure of the research study. A good research design is crucial for ensuring that the results of a study are valid and reliable. The four research designs in this proposed research study are (a) case study design, (b) ethnographic design, (c) phenomenological design, and (d) narrative design. While there are many research designs for a research study, researchers must remain mindful of choosing the right research design (Alam, 2021a). Research designs guide a researcher in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data and information for clarifying and solving problems (Osuagwu, 2020). Researchers use multiple case studies to provide in-depth knowledge of a phenomenon through in-depth descriptions and analysis (Takahashi & Araujo, 2020).

A multiple-case study design is a research method that involves studying multiple cases to understand a particular phenomenon or issue. As the researcher, I used a multiple-case study design to understand the topic better. The research design is a blueprint or plan researchers will use to answer a specific research question (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). Using qualitative multiple-case design research can be beneficial in gaining a deeper understanding of the research question. As the researcher, I used multiple-case designs to examine multiple cases in-depth, providing a rich and diverse perspective. The multiple-case design can also increase the reliability and validity of the findings by allowing for cross-case comparisons and data triangulation.

According to Yin (2018), espoused case studies rely on data triangulation and provide three principles relative to data collection. These principles are: (1). gather multiple sources of evidence to make the findings more convincing. This principle emphasizes the importance of collecting data from different sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents, to improve the credibility and validity of the findings. (2). Researchers must create a case study database to separate the raw data from the research report. Thus, this principle advocates for creating a separate database to store the raw data, which can help ensure that the data is not lost or tampered with, and I can easily access it for future research. (3). Researchers must maintain a chain of evidence linking data from the research question to the conclusions. The principle emphasizes the importance of maintaining a clear link between the data and the conclusions, which can help increase the study's transparency and replicability. Researchers use the multiple case

study design to gain an in-depth understanding of individual settings (Yin 2018), which is justifiable due to the complex nature of the object under investigation.

As the researcher, I used this approach to comprehensively understand the subject matter by capturing the various perspectives and experiences of the participants. Additionally, using multiple cases will enable researchers to identify patterns and similarities across cases, strengthening the research study. Finally, using a multiple-case design to compare the returns management strategies and processes of organizations already implementing returns management programs is an appropriate approach. By studying multiple cases, As the researcher, I can identify similarities and differences in the paths taken by different organizations and gain a more comprehensive understanding of the research question.

Additionally, comparing cases allows me to identify best practices and practical approaches to returns management and any challenges or issues that organizations have faced in implementing returns management programs. Using a comparative process can provide valuable insights for other organizations looking to implement similar programs. According to Bloomfield and Fisher (2019), the research design outlines the methods and procedures used to collect and analyze data to answer a specific research question, guides the entire research process, and helps ensure the researcher conducts a systematic and controlled study.

To ensure data saturation, as the researcher, I collected data until I reached a point where additional data collection no longer adds new themes to my research study.

Analyzing the data can help identify repetitiveness or redundancy, suggesting that I may have reached data saturation.

Population and Sampling

In qualitative research, researchers frequently employ purposeful sampling methods, such as snowball sampling, to choose participants. As the researcher, I used snowball sampling to identify and select participants for this qualitative research study. As the researcher, I collected data for this research study from supply chain/logistics professionals in the retail, manufacturing, or distribution industries in the Midwest of the United States. As the researcher, I used the semistructured interview process to understand better the importance of a returns management program and how returns management improves product returns operation. As the researcher, if permitted, I also review company documents for more relevant information to support the collected data and ensure data saturation. Therefore, I aim to find suitable candidates knowledgeable in designing and developing a returns management program.

As the researcher, I used inclusion and exclusion criteria to guide me in selecting potential participants for the research study. According to Albadri (2022), using inclusion and exclusion criteria helps researchers determine whether a participant will or will not be a part of the research study. Inclusion criteria help the researcher identify characteristics the potential participants must have to participate in the study (Albadri, 2022). For example, inclusion criteria for this research study are significant knowledge and understanding of returns management, practical business intelligence about their

returns process, and supply chain/logistics manager's experience. Participants must have at least five years of experience in the supply chain or logistics field and be managerial.

In contrast, exclusion criteria identify factors that will help the researcher disqualify potential participants from the research study (Albadri, 2022). Participants will be excluded from this research study if they do not have the abovementioned characteristics. The researcher must ensure that the research complies with scientific objectives and rigor and that the researcher follows the promise of ethical principles (Albadri, 2022). As the researcher, I interviewed selected participants in these settings, face-to-face or by phone, whichever is comfortable for the potential participants, and explained the interview protocol.

In qualitative research, interviewing can help researchers gather data that can provide substantial in-depth knowledge regarding the research question (Wood et al.,2019). As the researcher, I interviewed two to six participants for this research study. Campbell et al. (2020) proposed small groups of selected participants are often used in qualitative research because it allow the researcher to focus on the quality of data rather than the quantity. By working with a small group of participants, the researcher can spend more time with each individual and gather detailed data through interviews. In qualitative research, it is not uncommon for researchers to use a small sample size in their studies because it can provide a good balance between having enough data to draw meaningful conclusions and being feasible to conduct in terms of time and resources (Cobern & Adams, 2020).

Data saturation is when the data collection generates no new information or themes. This concept holds significance in qualitative research because it guarantees the appropriateness of the sample size and the representativeness of the collected data concerning the studied population (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In practical terms, saturation requires the researcher to collect data from enough informants or sources until they notice no new patterns and themes emerging in the data. Therefore, researchers should continue collecting data until new information is no longer emerging and they feel confident they thoroughly understand the research phenomenon (Mwita, 2022). I continued interviewing participants until I could no longer collect further information, which resulted in new themes or coding. If I cannot achieve data saturation, I use different methods and approaches. For example, I conducted interviews to gather data until I reached a point of data saturation. To achieve data saturation, I expanded my participant pool through various means, including online outreach, social media, or referrals from existing participants.

Ethical Research

Researchers are responsible for considering the potential ethical implications of their work throughout the research process, from designing the study and obtaining informed consent from participants to analyzing the data and disseminating the results. In addition, As the researcher, I must consider privacy, confidentiality, and potential harm to participants and ensure that the research is unbiased. Researchers must understand and adhere to ethical principles in their work, following responsible practices, obtaining informed consent from participants, protecting participant privacy and confidentiality,

and ensuring that the research study design minimizes harm (Sivasubramaniam et al., 2021). Additionally, researchers should be familiar with relevant laws, regulations, and institutional guidelines governing research conduct.

As the researcher, I explained to all participants the purpose of the research and the data collection process. It is essential to be transparent and clear about the purpose and function of the research study by providing information to participants about the research question, the methods used to collect data, and how the data will be used and analyzed. Also, as the researcher, I explained the informed consent to potential participants, explaining the details of the study to potential participants, including the purpose of the research, the procedures used, any risks or discomforts, and the benefits of participating. As the researcher, I encouraged participants to ask questions about the research study before deciding whether to participate. As the researcher, I kept participants informed throughout the study and explained that they could withdraw their consent anytime. As the researcher, I clarified to the participants that there would be no compensation or financial rewards for participating in this research. Fons et al. (2022) indicated in their study that the researcher must present informed consent to potential participants and explain detailed information about the research study, including its purpose and the possible risks and benefits, so that potential participants can make informed participation decisions.

The informed consent should be in a language the participant understands and should be voluntary, without coercion or undue influence. As the researcher, I also discussed the expected length of the interview, explained the confidentiality of

information collected during the interview, how I identified participants, and how I safeguarded all records. According to Ritchie (2021), the IRB protocols are crucial in helping students learn ethical research conduct and professional skills to manage their research study. As the researcher, I fully complied with the Walden University IRB guidelines and did not initiate my research study until I received the Walden University IRB authorization to proceed. My IRB number is 10-25-23-0032564. As the researcher, I kept the confidentiality of each participant and organization by not revealing the participants' or organizations' names.

To protect participants and organizations' identities, I assigned each participant and organization an alphanumeric code to protect the participants' and organizations' identities. For example, I used P1, P2, etcetera for participants to protect individual identity; for each organization, I used O1, O2, and so on to safeguard the organization's identity. I also used generic code for all documentation, such as document (1). Assigning alphanumeric codes to participants and organizations is a common practice to maintain confidentiality and protect their identities. This approach ensures that individual or organization information is protected.

As the researcher, I ensured the interview environment was safe and private for the participants. It is essential to create a secure and confidential setting for participants so that they feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences. According to Walden University's research governance procedures, the researcher's responsibility is to ensure all documentation is locked in a secure place with no access to anyone other than

the researcher. In addition, all devices used during the research process are password-protected; after five years, I will destroy all documentation.

Data Collection Instruments

In my case study, I was the primary data collection instrument and adhered to all ethical standards that Walden University requires. According to McGrath et al. (2019), the researcher is the prime data collection instrument in qualitative research and plays a critical role in the data collection. As the researcher, I recognize that my presence, interactions, and viewpoints can impact data collection. Therefore, I must remain mindful of my biases and subjectivity throughout the study. Monitoring and addressing biases during the data collection phase is essential. Moon (2019) indicated in qualitative research, the researcher should use various data collection techniques to triangulate the data to increase the validity of the findings. As the researcher, I used semistructured interviews to gather information from participants concerning returns management and the strategies and processes used to improve product returns. As the researcher, I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions to gather relevant information about returns management. Semistructured interview techniques, characterized by open-ended questions, offer flexibility and depth in exploring a topic, yielding rich research data (Monday, 2020).

As the researcher, I used semistructured interviewing to probe deeper into specific areas that occurred during the interview. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), the overall purpose of semistructured interviews for data collection is to gather information from key informants with a significant understanding and beliefs related to

the topic of interest. Mashuri et al. (2022) emphasized the flexibility of semistructured interviews, asserting that researchers can adjust their approach during interviews while adhering to a predetermined framework. Mashuri et al. (2022) underscored the importance of crafting semistructured interviews thoughtfully to facilitate an appropriate blend of guidance and receptiveness. By adopting a balanced approach to the interview, I ensured that the data collected were rigorous and respectful of participants' diverse perspectives. In a semistructured interview, the researcher prepares open-ended questions to guide the conversation and allows flexibility to explore additional relevant issues that may arise during the interview (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

I used an audiotaping device to ensure the rigor and validity of the interview transcripts because using an audiotaping device to record interviews is an excellent way to ensure the rigor and validity of the transcripts. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of documenting data objectively and comprehensively, which involves capturing all relevant information accurately and completely. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) also recommended using audiotaping to capture details in the transcription of data, which can help ensure that the data are accurate and that no critical information is lost. The audiotaping device allows the researcher to use the data collected as a reference for any discrepancies or questions that may arise during the data analysis. Rutakumwa et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of interviewers being mindful of how their approach, questions, tone, and responsiveness during interviews might affect the quality and relevance of the collected data, and failing to consider these factors may lead to poorer data quality.

Additionally, it can help ensure that the interviewee's responses are correct and not misrepresented. Informed consent is a critical aspect of research ethics that ensures participants are fully informed about the nature of the research and understand the risks and benefits associated with participation. The informed consent process involves providing potential participants with information about the study, including its purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits (Xu et al., 2020a). According to Klykken (2022), researchers should provide pertinent information when inviting participants to engage in the research. Researchers should explain to participants that they have the right to withdraw their consent and stop the recording at any time and what happens to the recording once the study is over.

Member checking, a method where study participants verify the accuracy of data collected about them, emerges as a highly effective approach for guaranteeing the precision and authenticity of information (McKim, 2023). Qualitative research is a cornerstone for establishing trustworthiness in data-driven investigations, allowing interviewees to authenticate transcribed data (McGrath et al., 2019). McKim (2023) indicated this practice serves as an asset for researchers, aiding in identifying errors or inconsistencies within data, thereby bolstering the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Choosing the appropriate data collection instruments for a research study may be challenging. Sukmawati (2023) indicated surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups are standard data collection instruments. Busetto et al. (2020) suggested some of the most common qualitative data methods include document analysis, field observations, semistructured interviews, and focus groups. These qualitative methods aim to explore

participants' subjective experiences and meanings rather than quantifying data numerically. Qualitative methods are useful for analyzing complex and nuanced phenomena, generating new insights, and developing hypotheses for further research (Busetto et al., 2020). Researchers must carefully consider the research question, population, and resources available when choosing which instrument(s) to use. The data collection technique is a process that, as the researcher, I used to gather and measure information systematically, enabling one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes.

Data Collection Technique

To address the research question, I used various methods to find and research supply chain/logistics companies in the Midwest of the United States. I checked out industry associations such as the Association for Supply Chain Management (ASCM) and the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals (CSCMP). These organizations may have a list of member companies or directories to help me find companies in the Midwest. I also checked the Better Business Bureau for Midwest logistics or supply chain companies. I checked social media platforms like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook to search for Midwest supply chain or logistics companies. I checked the state's economic development agency's website to find resources and logistics and supply chain company directories.

Once I have identified potential companies, I begin researching them by visiting their websites to check their corporate governance and determine who to select to interview. The eligibility criteria for selecting participants for my multiple-case study are

supply chain/logistics managers who have successfully implemented returns management strategies and processes in their organizations to manage product returns. I gathered company website information to narrow my search and identify the best candidates for my proposed research study. I conducted semistructured interviews to collect relevant data from participants. Qualitative research interviews are a way to gain insight into how people experience and make sense of the world around them; interviewing questions allow researchers to uncover the complexity and nuance of individuals' lived experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the social world from their perspective (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

I asked potential participants about the possibility of obtaining relevant documents such as schedules, charts, graphs, or other internal records related to returns management. I requested permission to use them in my research study. Qualitative research often involves the analysis of various types of data to explore phenomena in-depth (Thelwall & Nevill, 2021). Triangulation, a method frequently employed in research, combines preexisting data with other data types to bolster the reliability of a study and validate the coherence of research outcomes while promoting a deeper understanding of the subject under investigation (Morgan, 2022). By obtaining relevant documents such as schedules, charts, graphs, or other internal records, I have access to valuable data that can help increase the validity of the findings. It is essential to obtain permission from the participants before using any of the received documents in a research study.

I used a research journal as a learning tool for self-reflection on issues arising during the research process. According to Dodgson (2019), researchers must be mindful of how their own experiences and perspectives might limit their ability to generalize findings or to understand the experiences of others. At the same time, individuals must stay aware of the unique insights their experiences can bring to the research process. Researchers must strive to create a collaborative and inclusive research environment that values diverse perspectives and experiences; the goal should be to produce rigorous and socially responsible (Dodgson, 2019). Keeping a research journal allows me to document my progress, reflect on any challenges or problems during the research process, and record any insights or ideas that come to mind. Thus, this can help me stay organized and focused throughout the research process and be a valuable resource for later reference. It can also be an excellent way to reflect on my biases and blind spots, which can help increase the validity of my research findings.

I discussed with potential participants their choice of a predetermined location to conduct the interview, allowing them to predetermine the day and time most comfortable for them. I acquired permission from Walden IRB before emailing possible participants. I included the informed consent form to be signed, scanned, and returned by participants before conducting any interview. It is essential to allow potential participants to choose a location and time that is convenient for them and to obtain their informed consent before conducting any interviews. Additionally, obtaining the necessary approvals from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before proceeding with a research study is essential. According to Lapid et al. (2019), the IRB is responsible for reviewing all research

proposals involving human participants to ensure researchers meet ethical standards and that the risks to participants abate.

The IRB also monitors ongoing research to ensure that participants are protected and the investigation follows the approved protocols. Yin (2018) indicated interviewing is an essential source of qualitative case studies to substantiate the research question. Hence, this allows the researcher to understand the participants' perspectives and experiences, which the researcher can then use to support or refute the research question.

Furthermore, interviews can provide data on the context and background of the case, which can help to give a complete understanding of the case studied. An interview protocol helps collect consistent data and critical information for the research study. An effective interview protocol should elicit the knowledge and insights necessary to achieve the research objectives by developing a list of open-ended questions that encourage participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences on the topic of interest (Jiménez & Orozco, 2021). Employing a standardized interview protocol ensures uniformity across multiple interviews while still accommodating the diverse responses of each research participant (Hunter, 2012). Interview protocol may help researchers stay focused on the key topics and questions and provide a clear framework for analyzing the data collected. I used my interview protocol as a guide during the semistructured interview to gather relevant information from potential participants for my research study (See Appendix B). Researchers can use a semistructured interview technique during the interview process (Daniel, 2020).

Building rapport with participants is an essential aspect of conducting a successful interview. According to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019), building rapport allows the interviewer to create a comfortable and trusting environment for the participant, which can encourage them to share detailed and honest information relevant to the research question. Building rapport can also help reduce bias in the interview process, as participants may be more willing to share their thoughts and feelings with someone they feel comfortable interviewing (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Semistructured interviews are a standard method used in qualitative research to gather detailed information about people's experiences, attitudes, and perceptions.

Researchers combine data collection processes in qualitative research to accomplish the research goal (Alam, 2021b). Researchers can gain valuable information through member checking (McKim, 2023). According to Motulsky (2021), member checking is a widely used and recommended method for checking the validity and trustworthiness of the data. I used member checking to solicit participants' feedback to ensure the data reflects the accuracy and resonance of their experiences.

Data Organization Technique

I plan to collect, code, and analyze data to create themes and trends for this research study. Through interviews, researchers can develop codes that might apply to individual words, sentences, paragraphs, or visualized segments of qualitative data (Lochmiller, 2021). Once data are collected, coding will help organize and make sense of the data. Researchers who acquire qualitative data for analysis may find it challenging (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Effectively managing and making sense of qualitative

data, such as interview transcripts and field notes, can be unstructured and difficult to quantify, making it challenging to identify patterns and themes (Islam& Aldaihani, 2022).

Researchers may use various techniques, such as coding and data reduction, to help organize and analyze the data (Lochmiller, 2021). There are multiple data processing tools available that can help researchers manage and analyze qualitative data. Some software devices like NVivo and Atlas help researchers with qualitative data analysis. In contrast, others, like Microsoft Excel, are more general-purpose tools. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggest Microsoft Excel and NVivo can be as effective as other specialized qualitative data analysis software. NVivo is a software tool for qualitative data analysis that helps researchers organize, analyze, and interpret interview transcripts (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). NVivo is a powerful tool that allows researchers to make sense of their data and gain insights.

To keep track of the data collected from interviews, I used Microsoft Cloud to store and protect digital files, a secure and reliable method, and a thumb drive with password protection as a backup device in case of any issues with cloud storage. Lin (2009) indicated data management is crucial in quantitative and qualitative research to uphold data integrity and safeguard the well-being of research participants. I followed applicable laws and regulations related to data storage and security. Lin (2009) emphasized the importance of researchers understanding data storage and retention policies and becoming acquainted with record-keeping policies. When organizing data, I ensured that each participant's information was confidential by identifying each participant with an alphanumeric code such as P1. To ensure confidentiality, I used a

generic name, such as O1, to code organization, Doc1 for Documents, and P1 for the participants.

Using pseudonyms to identify participants and organizations is an excellent way to maintain confidentiality. According to Cypress (2019), safeguarding the identities of research participants and protecting their confidentiality is of utmost importance in qualitative research. As the researcher, I used several effective strategies to protect personal information and maintain confidentiality, such as securing data storage methods and removing identifier components and pseudonyms. In addition, the data were stored securely and only accessible to me. I used a thumb drive with password protection and stored the data in a fireproof and waterproof safe to secure the participants' transcribed interviews. I will keep the data for 3 to 10 years, ensuring that all data is stored safely and securely.

I placed these hard drives in a fireproof lockbox to prevent any damage. After 3 to 10 years, I will then destroy the records securely. According to Lin (2009), retaining the required data for a period ranging from 3 to 10 years is recommended. Taking the necessary precautions when destroying the records is also an excellent practice. A paper shredder is a suitable method for destroying paper documents. Data removal software to delete electronic files is a perfect way to destroy data.

Data Analysis

Data collection can be complicated if not done correctly and jeopardize the entire case study (Yin, 2018). Lester et al. (2020) indicated in their research that understanding qualitative analysis can be challenging for researchers unfamiliar with its complexities,

and the various approaches available can be overwhelming, especially when combined with the necessity to develop a qualitative mindset for effectively interpreting data. Qualitative research is transparent and systematic and establishes adherence to evidence, which means developing research procedures that allow people to review and scrutinize the data used to support the findings and conclusions (Yin, 2016). Qualitative data analysis involves examining nonnumerical data such as text, images, videos, or observations to identify themes, patterns, and insights into the research study.

Before conducting a case study analysis, researchers need to have a clear and well-defined analytic strategy (Yin, 2018). Mashuri et al. (2022) suggested covering themes or topics in qualitative research. Yin (2018) states an effective analytic strategy should include a clear definition of the research question and objectives, a detailed description of the case or cases, and a plan for how the data will be collected and analyzed. The strategy should outline the steps to collect and analyze the data and the methods used to ensure the findings are quality and valid.

Researchers need to be methodical when performing data analysis to avoid bias and ensure the validity and reliability of their results (Yin, 2016). In addition, it is essential to document and report the data analysis process transparently and in detail, allowing others to evaluate and replicate the findings. Lester et al. (2020) indicated by following these steps: preparing and organizing the data, transcribing the data, becoming familiar with the data corpus, keeping notes of the data, coding the data, and producing categories and themes from underlying coded passages, you can make the analysis process transparent and enhance the credibility of the research findings. Nassaji (2020)

suggested effective qualitative research should be robust, well-informed, and thoroughly documented.

Lester et al. (2020) indicated learning data collection is challenging and a critical part of the case study. It is crucial to adhere to established protocols and employ suitable methods to maintain the study's validity and reliability, which ensures accurate and unbiased data collection and prevents any compromise in the findings.

Researchers need to consider techniques that will help develop a rigorous research study. Triangulation is a technique used in research to increase the rigor and validity of an investigation by using multiple methods or sources of data to examine a research question (Noble & Heale, 2019). Natow (2020) conducted elite interviews and applied triangulation to enhance the findings' credibility and validity.

Triangulation is a research technique that involves using multiple sources or methods to investigate a research question (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation helps to address the limitations of any single method and provides a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. Triangulation can cross-validate findings and provide a more robust version of the phenomenon. Yin (2018) suggests four types of triangulation in qualitative research: (1) data triangulation using multiple data sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents; (2) researcher triangulation through the involvement of different evaluators to ensure objectivity and reliability; (3) theory triangulation through the adoption of multiple perspectives on the same data set to provide a more comprehensive understanding; and (4) methodological triangulation through the adoption of different complementary methods, such as quantitative and

qualitative methods, to provide a more robust analysis. I performed data triangulation during the data analysis of the research study.

Triangulation is used in research to increase the credibility and validity of findings by collecting data from multiple sources or using various methods (Noble & Heale, 2019). I used triangulation for crosschecking data because triangulation is a technique that can improve the validity and reliability of the research findings by collecting and analyzing data from multiple sources or methods. Natow (2020) expressed that researchers can better understand the phenomenon by combining different perspectives or approaches. Triangulation is an approach to helping crosscheck data and identify inconsistencies or discrepancies, leading to a deeper understanding of the research topic.

I used Yin's (2011) five-phase cycle, a valuable framework for conducting qualitative data analysis. The five phases are as follows: (1) Compiling the data: Collecting and compiling all relevant data from various sources. (2) Disassembling the data: Breaking the data into smaller parts for further analysis. (3) Reassembling the data: Examining the relationships between the different parts of the data to gain a deeper understanding. (4) Interpreting the meaning of the data: Exploring the significance of the data and drawing conclusions about what it means. (5) Concluding the data analysis: Summarize the analysis's findings and draw conclusions. The framework helps organize and structure the data analysis process systematically and rigorously, and it is beneficial for case study research.

Data Compiling

Compiling is an approach that thoroughly organizes data into a database system (Daniel, 2020). By collecting and storing data in a usable form, the researcher can use practical answers to the research questions (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Also, compiling is transcribing, enabling researchers to quickly evaluate data from interviews or focus groups (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). I used interviewing techniques for this research study as the primary data collection tool (see Appendix B) to capture supply chain/logistics professionals' experiences developing and implementing returns management strategies.

Interviewing techniques are valuable for collecting data on supply chain/logistics professionals' experiences developing and implementing returns management strategies. Face-to-face interviews are often used in qualitative research to gain an in-depth understanding and insights from participants about their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). I performed phone interviews using open-ended questions (see Appendix A), followed an interview protocol (see Appendix B), and examined company documentation to assemble all data for the research study. Hunter (2012) stated research participants should have ample flexibility in expressing their interpretations and that researchers should use interview techniques that ensure consistency across multiple interviews. In addition, examining company documentation can also provide valuable information and context for the study. According to Natow (2020), using various data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, and documents, provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

A combination of FTF interviews, observations, and documentation review is a solid approach for collecting data on supply chain/logistics professionals' experiences in developing and implementing returns management strategies. Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021) conveyed in face-to-face interviews, the interviewer and interviewee can interact in real time, meaning they are present in the same physical space and can engage in a back-and-forth conversation. A face-to-face interview allows for observing verbal and nonverbal cues, which can provide additional information and context to the participant's responses (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). Nonverbal cues can be incredibly insightful during interviews; for instance, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice convey a wealth of information.

Data Disassembling

The disassembling phase in qualitative research involves separating the collected data into meaningful groupings or categories, also known as coding (Yin, 2016). Once all the data are compiled and organized, investigators can disassemble the data into meaningful groupings through coding (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Researchers should disassemble data relevant to the subject (Daniel, 2020) and then link the data to the research study (Yin, 2016). Linking relevant data to a research study is crucial for supporting its conclusions and findings. Researchers need to identify the similarities and differences in the data and convert usable data into themes, concepts, or ideas (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Data analysis involves identifying patterns and relationships in the data and correcting the information to create meaningful insights. As the researcher, I used data analysis to extract useful information from the data to answer

research questions and support the conclusion. Researchers can use computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software or more common software programs, such as Word, Excel, and Access, to help streamline the data analysis process for a more rigorous data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). These software programs may help researchers manage and organize their data and perform various analysis tasks such as coding, theme identification, and data visualization. In addition, researchers can use standard software programs such as Word, Excel, and Access to analyze qualitative data. Ose (2016) presented a straightforward approach to organizing and analyzing qualitative data, utilizing Excel and Word to structure qualitative data effectively.

It is important to note that the choice of software will depend on the researcher's specific needs and the type of data they are gathering. Different software will have distinct advantages and disadvantages and are better suited for various data and analysis tasks. However, using a software program only provides technical support (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Yin, 2011).

As the researcher, I ensured the correct input into a software program that sorts and codes all data. Creating a database is significant to the research (Yin, 2016). I used Word and Excel to organize data for this research study. Il use NVivo 14 software to retrieve and recode data when needed. The NVivo 14 software is a qualitative data analysis software that the researcher will use to collect, analyze, and retrieve data from various sources, such as transcripts of interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions. NVivo 14 can be a user-friendly tool for novice users, particularly those interested in

thematic analysis and synthesis. NVivo's range of features and resources can make it easier for users to organize and analyze qualitative data (Elliott, 2021).

Using NVivo 14, researchers can efficiently analyze their data, identifying patterns, themes, and codes. Rylee and Cavanagh (2022) explain in their study how NVivo14 codes and categorizes data, identifies patterns and themes, and visualizes findings. NVivo 14 can also be used to manage the research project, which can help keep track of your progress and stay organized. Elliott (2021) expressed how NVivo 14 software is a tool that a novice researcher can use to manage research projects, monitor progress, and maintain organization.

Data Reassembling

After disassembling the data, reassembling involves coding and mapping, which is put into perspective to create themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Reassembling data after disassembling it requires coding and mapping the information to develop themes and patterns, which can provide insights and understanding. Yin (2016) expressed the reassembling process means adjusting data and themes until the researcher achieves a satisfactory result. According to Castleberry and Nolen (2018), themes portray information about the research question using data set patterns. In qualitative research, the reassembling process entails organizing and interpreting data to identify patterns and themes pertinent to the research question. Themes play a crucial role in this process by summarizing and organizing data that relates directly to the research question and categorizing themes into subthemes using hierarchies and matrices (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

Both hierarchical and matrix organizational structures are valuable tools for organizing data analysis. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggested by systematically organizing themes into hierarchical structures and using matrices to explore relationships across different dimensions, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the research question and generate more insightful findings. Researchers should reassemble similar data to align with similar concepts and dissimilar data to align with different ideas, and they should use the hierarchy process to group the data to discover themes, patterns, and code options (Yin, 2016).

Researchers frequently employ coding and categorizing data to pinpoint patterns and themes, enabling them to group and contrast similar data to identify key concepts and ideas (Mezmir, 2020). A hierarchical approach to organizing the data can also help discover new insights and identify connections between different pieces of information (Yin, 2016). The utilization of matrices as a valuable tool in reassembling data to craft a new narrative, coupled with their ability to organize and display data clearly, facilitates the identification of patterns and themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The use of hierarchies can also be helpful in this process because it can help to identify relationships between different pieces of data and to understand how other pieces of information fit together to form a larger narrative (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). By developing a table of rows and columns, a researcher can visually organize and reassemble the data, making it easier to identify patterns and themes and create a new narrative. The rows represent one dimension, and the columns represent another dimension for researchers to discover themes, patterns, and code options (Yin, 2016).

During the reassembling process, I compare data to find any themes, patterns, and codes for this research study and analyze the data in the research study. By comparing the data, I could identify themes, patterns, and codes that may not immediately appear upon initial examination. Thus, this helps me to gain a deeper understanding of the data and draw more meaningful conclusions from it. Analyzing data helps me uncover patterns, relationships, and trends that may not be immediately evident, and it also helps me identify outliers, errors, and inconsistencies in the data. By identifying and correcting these errors and inconsistencies, I improved my data quality and ensured that my analysis was accurate and reliable.

Data Interpretation

In the interpretation phase of the research process, a researcher may use various techniques to analyze and make sense of the collected data. According to Yin (2016), the interpretation phase of a qualitative research study involves gathering all the data collected during the investigation and analyzing it to develop a narrative that provides a robust interpretation of the data. Coding is a widely used technique in qualitative research for analyzing data. Coding involves systematically categorizing and organizing qualitative data into meaningful themes or concepts that draw conclusions or make interpretations about the research topic (Mezmir, 2020). Another technique is the identification of themes, which involves identifying recurring patterns or ideas in the data. Researchers may also develop concepts to help explain the data and understand the underlying meaning of the observations (Mezmir, 2020).

These techniques can help the researcher understand the research question comprehensively and draw meaningful conclusions from the data. The researcher creates codes or labels for specific data extracts, then groups them into themes, and then creates a thematic map to visually represent the data and the relationships between the codes and themes; this can help the researcher to understand the data better, the patterns and themes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Coding helps ensure that data is validated, the analysis is systematic, and that others can easily understand and replicate the study. According to Yin (2016), coding is an essential step in achieving the highest level of research analysis. There are several types of coding, including inductive, descriptive, and structural coding.

Descriptive, structural, and inductive coding are all methods used in qualitative data analysis. Researchers use Inductive coding in qualitative data analysis, especially in studies exploring new ideas and insights (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Lester et al. (2020) indicated that inductive analysis directly derives patterns, themes, and categories from the data. In addition, this process enables the researcher to discover patterns and themes from the data and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019).

Other coding methods that could be essential to this research include descriptive and structural coding. Descriptive coding is a valuable tool for qualitative researchers because it enables them to explore the data's richness and complexity and develop a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016). Doyle et al. (2020) expressed in their study that a qualitative descriptive design is most suitable for qualitative research because it acknowledges the issue's subjective nature and the

participants' diverse experiences. Descriptive coding is a systematic way of organizing and making sense of qualitative data. A frequently proposed rationale for using a descriptive approach is to provide straightforward descriptions of experiences and perceptions, mainly when the topic is unknown and is under investigation (Doyle et al.,2020).

Structural coding is used in qualitative research to label and describe specific research data, breaking the data into smaller increments for further analysis. Structural coding is a way to mark literature so the researcher can access the literature review data quickly (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2016). Inductive, descriptive, and structural coding are promising approaches to help the researcher navigate through and between the data.

Data Conclusion

The data conclusion phase is the final step in the research process, where the researcher summarizes the study's findings and draws conclusions based on the evidence collected and analyzed. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) note that the data conclusion phase is essential in the research process. Yin (2016) suggests that the conclusion is considered part of the analysis phase and, thus, the fifth phase of the research methodology. Mezmir (2020) implied that the final step in a research study is crucial for providing insights and drawing conclusions based on the analysis. The final stage allows the researcher to determine whether the research question has been answered and draw meaningful conclusions from the data collected and analyzed. The data conclusion summarizes the findings from the data analysis and should provide a higher-level understanding of the research question. Yin (2016) stated in the conclusion process, the results and

interpretations should address all stereotypes and generalizations. The data conclusion is crucial for making sense and obtaining meaningful insights into the data. Yin (2016) stated that the data conclusion is an overarching statement or series of data reports that elevates the empirical findings to a higher conceptual level.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability refers to how consistently measurements remain stable over time, while validity refers to whether those measurements accurately reflect what they mean (Sürücü and Maslakçi, 2020). Cypress (2017) emphasizes the importance of reliability and validity in qualitative and quantitative research. According to Sürücü and Maslakçi (2020), understanding the reliability and validity of research scales is crucial for producing meaningful results, and ensuring these factors are accurately measured is essential for trustworthy research outcomes. Daniel (2019) recognizes the indispensability of trustworthiness in research, particularly in qualitative studies, where demonstrating the reliability of study results is essential.

Ensuring the credibility and rigor of qualitative research hinges on verifying its reliability and validity. Vu (2021) emphasized the importance of reliability and validity in assessing research quality. Furthermore, Hayashi et al. (2019) underscored the essential role of reliability and validity in evaluating the measurement instruments used in research studies. Singh et al. (2021) emphasized the growing necessity for robust reliability and validity evaluation standards.

Reliability

Reliability in research refers to the consistency or stability of results over time and across different conditions (Golafshani, 2003; Cypress, 2017). Research findings must be reliable so that other researchers can replicate the study and reach the same conclusions (Schmidt & Oh, 2016). Yin (2018) indicated that research reliability is when a researcher can arrive at the same findings and conclusions of a research study and minimize the errors and biases in a research study. Reliability is the credibility of a qualitative research study and how researchers apply it to test the consistency of the methodological process (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Researchers should keep exceptional documentation of the case study procedures by creating a database and developing case study protocols to ensure reliability (Yin, 2018).

I used triangulation to increase the reliability and validity of my research by using multiple methods or sources of data collection. I sought information by interviewing participants and collecting data from company documentation, which can help strengthen the findings' reliability. In addition, by testing and comparing data from multiple sources, I will be able to identify any inconsistencies or discrepancies in the data, further increasing the reliability of the study. I sought reliability by testing and comparing data I retrieved from interviewing participants and collecting data from company documentation. I used triangulation to improve the reliability of the results of my research study. Researchers could use reliability to address the consistency and transparency of a research study, ensuring that other researchers undertake the methods used in a research study (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I applied member-checking to reach

data saturation. The objective of reliability aims to minimize biases within a research study (Yin, 2018).

Validity

Validity measures how well the study is designed and executed. Sürücü and Maslakçi (2020) expressed validity in research refers to whether a tool or instrument is measuring what it claims to measure. Validity is how a researcher provides the appropriate tools, processes, and data in their research study (Daniel, 2019). Sürücü and Maslakçi (2020) highlighted valid measurement tools are essential for obtaining meaningful and trustworthy results. Valid measurement tools are the cornerstone of any research or assessment process. In addition, construct validity is when the researcher develops adequate operational measures for the research study using these three tactics: multiple sources of evidence, creating a chain of evidence, and reviewing the draft case for constructive feedback (Yin, 2018). Quintão et al. (2020) suggested it is helpful to divide the validity of a research study into internal and external validity when testing its validity. For example, internal validity is critical in research, especially in studies that establish causal relationships between variables; in contrast, external validity refers to how study findings apply to different populations, environments, or periods, how accurately external validity replicates a study, and whether its effects hold in real-world scenarios (Quintão et al., 2020). Hayashi et al. (2019) argue validity is a continuous process from the inception of the research to its publication.

I continue to seek validity throughout the research study process. Triangulation enhances the accuracy and comprehensiveness of understanding the investigated issue,

thereby bolstering the validity and credibility of the findings (Nassaji, 2020). I could not use triangulation to evaluate the credibility and validity of my research findings because I was not granted permission to access or observe relevant documentation.

Credibility

Credibility refers to confidence in the research findings' authenticity (Thai et al., 2022). Researchers established credible information from the participants' original data and correctly interpreted the participants' actual views to enhance the research study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Like internal validity (Yin, 2016), credibility is how researchers verify clarity and adequacy to justify using specific methods, samples, data collection, analysis, and other research procedures (Singh et al., 2021). Researchers use credibility to determine if the research study is trustworthy. Researchers can achieve credibility through data verification, a detailed description of the researcher's approach to the data analysis, confirmation of the research's initial outcome, and the use of direct references (Daniel, 2019). Researchers must establish credibility throughout the research studies by being honest and transparent in reporting on how to address and identify biases throughout the research process that strengthen the accuracy and credibility of the research results (Johnson et al., 2020).

I used member checking to demonstrate credibility and determine if the study was precise and meticulous. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), researchers can use member checking to ensure credibility in a research study. When designing a research study, the analysis must be rigorous, which is crucial to the dependability of the research study. According to Pompeii (2015), researchers should keep detailed field notes and

audio recordings of all research activities and events to strengthen the dependability of qualitative research.

I record the semistructured interviews with the participants using an audio recorder. I kept thorough coding notes throughout the data analysis process, which I checked against the transcripts of the audio recordings. Pompeii (2015) proposed researchers should thoroughly document their research activities and events. This practice would enable researchers to ensure their findings are reliable and accurate. Using field notes is a good research practice, and researchers should include descriptions of the research setting, events, interactions, and the researcher's thoughts and reflections. To maintain consistency, I document all changes and revisions to the research protocol and record when and how I implemented changes. I make sure to obtain approvals or permissions before implementing any changes to the protocol.

Dependability

Dependability in research refers to the consistency and stability of findings over time and across different conditions essential for ensuring the reliability and trustworthiness of research results (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Janis (2022) indicated dependability is one of the critical criteria for evaluating the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Pompeii (2015) stated researchers should keep detailed field notes and audio recordings of all research activities and events to strengthen the dependability of qualitative research. Singh et al. (2021) indicated dependability is crucial in research and analysis. In qualitative research, rigor is vital to establish trust and confidence in the findings. Tuval-Mashiach (2021) suggested a clear and thorough research design and

transparent and detailed documentation of the research process can help establish the study's dependability. In qualitative research, researchers use dependability to ensure consistency and stability (Janis, 2022). The framework also considers whether the study provides enough information about the research process to allow for replication and validation by other researchers (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). I used a recording device to record participant interviews to achieve trustworthiness in my research study. I applied member checking to ensure dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability in research refers to the extent to which the results or findings of a study can be verified or corroborated by other researchers (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). Confirmability, also known as credibility, is a principle of qualitative research that ensures that the findings are based on solid evidence and verified by other researchers (Korstjens and Moser, 2018). Confirmability is critical to ensuring the rigor and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Nassaji, 2020).

Confirmability ensures the research process and outcome are free from bias and influences. Singh et al. (2021) noted confirmability is a criterion of trustworthiness in qualitative research, referring to the degree to which the findings by the participants and the data rather than the researcher's biases and preconceptions. Nassaji (2020) stresses researchers can enhance the transparency and credibility of their findings by offering thorough explanations of how they collected data, conducted analyses, and interpreted results. I kept detailed and accurate data to help ensure the research findings' confirmability. Electronic recording of materials, such as audio or video recordings, can

be especially useful for capturing data that might be difficult to record in written form, like speech patterns or nonverbal behaviors.

Written field notes can also help capture observations and thoughts in real-time. It is essential to keep notes as detailed as possible and accurately reflect what is being observed or recorded. I used the semistructured interviews technique to gather data from potential participants, and member checking and triangulation were used to ensure confirmability. I achieved data saturation when there were no new themes. A researcher is responsible for providing detailed notes and documentation of the entire research process to ensure transparency and allow for replication and validation by other researchers. I include information about the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques to ensure transparency. Korstjens and Moser's (2018) study highlights the importance of transparency in research to ensure the investigation is trustworthy and credible.

Transferability

Transferability is when other researchers can transfer qualitative research results to a different context (Tuval-Mashiach, 2021). The researcher must also ensure the research is reliable and replicable. Korstjens and Moser (2018) noted that the researcher must provide a detailed description of the research process to enable the reader to determine if the findings are transferable. Transferability is one aspect used to establish the trustworthiness of research findings. Reliability in qualitative research is critical to ensure the results are valid and reliable. The concept of transferability is how the reader assesses the data to understand better how the researcher addresses a particular problem

within the research study and if the result is transferable to other contexts and situations (Maxwell, 2021). To ensure that researchers use the data from this study, I kept meticulously documented data throughout the research process, which is a critical step to ensure that the findings are reliable and credible and that future researchers can use the data from the study. I provide a clear and transparent account of the methods used during the research process. Maintaining meticulous documentation can help ensure the data can be reanalyzed or used in future studies. Daniel (2019) suggested that researchers attain transferability by providing clear evidence of the research process, the researcher's adoptions during data collection and analysis, and the discourse of challenges during the research process. Transferability can verify the study's external validity and generalize it to other settings, populations, and contexts. By providing a detailed description of the research process and methods, the researcher allows the reader to assess the transferability of the findings and thus establish trustworthiness.

Data Saturation

In research, data saturation refers to the point in data collection when additional data no longer contributes new insights or information to the research question (Guest et al., 2020). At this point, the researcher has reached an end where the data have become saturated; continuing to collect data will not provide any additional information or themes not identified. Data saturation is when no new information or themes emerge from the data (Guest et al., 2020). Data saturation is an indicator of the completeness and adequacy of the data and is often used to determine when data collection stops.

In qualitative research, the researcher determines the sample size by data saturation rather than statistical power calculations, as in quantitative analysis. Guest et al. (2020) indicated data saturation is when no new information or themes emerge from the collected data. Researchers use data saturation as a criterion to determine the sample size by continuing to collect data until they reach a point where no new information is emerging from the data. Data saturation is when the researcher can have confidence that the sample size is sufficient for addressing the research questions. Mwita (2022) suggested that saturation provides evidence that the researcher has collected enough data to answer the research questions and generate theories or concepts grounded in the data. Saturation also ensures the validity and credibility of the study by assuring that the researcher has thoroughly explored the phenomenon under investigation and that the findings are reliable and trustworthy (Mwita, 2022). Data saturation is an essential concept in qualitative research because it ensures that the data collected is thorough and complete and that the conclusions drawn from the analysis are well-supported by the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I can reach data saturation by conducting interviews with participants until they have shared all the information they can provide. I sought information from diverse participants until I achieved data saturation. I follow the interview protocol developed for this study (see Appendix B).

Transition and Summary

Section 2 includes an outline of my role as the researcher in this study and factors that influenced the research method and design. Section 2 also includes a detailed description of participants, target population, and sampling. I summarized procedures for my proposed doctoral study for data collection, organization, analysis, reliability and validity, and saturation. In Section 3, I provide clear and concise findings applicable to supply chain management professional practice concerning RM. I discuss how study results can inform and improve RM programs and how analysis can impact social change. In addition, I provide recommendations for action and further research to extend knowledge and findings of this study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

This qualitative multiple case study investigated management strategies and processes for improving product returns. I used the RBV theory as the conceptual framework. I used semistructured interview techniques to collect data from two distinct supply chain senior managers with over 5 years of experience in supply chain and reverse logistics management at different companies in the Midwest United States, offering a comprehensive understanding of RM strategies and processes. Data were thoroughly collected from participants to ensure comprehensiveness, and subsequently, I validated data through a member-checking process. Participants contributed primary data through responses during semistructured interviews.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this proposed study was: What RM strategies and processes do supply chain managers use to manage product returns effectively and efficiently? In this section, I identify, analyze, and discuss themes to address the research question. The conceptual framework I used for this case study is the RBV theory, which was introduced by Wernerfelt in 1984 and developed by Barney in 1991. I used the RBV theory to identify each company's unique resources and capabilities, focusing on internal strengths for improving RM strategies and processes. The RBV theory focuses on firm internal resources and capabilities as sources of sustainable competitive advantage (Lubis, 2022). Assensoh-Kodua (2019) stated the RBV theory involves improving organizational internal resources, capabilities, assets,

and competencies. Huang et al. (2016) emphasized the RBV theory is used for practical insights for firms seeking to enhance their return processes.

I sent invitations to potential participants, inviting them to participate in a study focused on management strategies and processes for improving product returns. I used purposive snowball sampling to identify well-informed participants about RM strategies and processes. Two supply chain senior managers from distinct organizations agreed to participate in my research. I collected signed consent letters from both, confirming their willingness to participate. I then conducted phone interviews with each participant. Mweshi and Sakyi (2020) emphasized in qualitative research, selecting a small and strategically-chosen group of participants can be sufficient for thorough and comprehensive findings.

I used alphanumeric codes such as P1 and P2 to refer to participants. I used a PR200 cell phone recorder to record phone interviews. Following this, I transcribed recordings using Microsoft Word. To ensure accuracy, I conducted member-checking methods, with both participants confirming accuracy of information. For data organization, coding, and analysis, I incorporated Yin's five-phase cycle using NVivo 14 systematically manage analysis, coding, and development of themes from data. I developed codes, exported them to an Excel spreadsheet, and created a table in a Word document. Subsequently, I grouped codes into clusters and identified themes based on similarities. Based on the research question and analysis of interview questions, I identified three emergent themes: (enhancing customer experience, mitigating RM costs, and aligning adequate RM strategies and processes.

Theme 1: Enhancing Customer Experience

Customer experience has become essential for retailers in terms of online and physical store shopping to secure a competitive edge and ensure sustained customer satisfaction, generating long-term sustainability (Pei et al., 2020). Zaki and Neely (2019) found 89% of companies prioritize competing based on customer experience, as poor customer experiences have cost U.S. businesses $83 billion annually. De Araujo et al. (2018) found 92% of consumers are inclined to repurchase if the return process is convenient, while 82% are unlikely to do so if the return process is inconvenient. The first theme identified through data analysis is enhancing customer experience, regardless of whether customers engage with businesses online or in physical stores.

Both participants highlighted prioritizing positive customer experiences in their organizations. P2 stated, “The company’s objective is to ensure that every customer touchpoint is seamlessly easy, aiming to provide customers with a hassle-free experience, particularly in returns.” P2 expressed, “this strategy aligns with the broader company strategy, prioritizing customer retention.” Phau et al. (2022) argued flexible return policies like hassle-free returns are crucial for competitiveness and enhancing customer relationships. Rintamäki et al. (2021) noted although lenient return policies incur processing costs, they are beneficial because the resulting increase in sales outweighs these costs, signaling product quality and reducing risks of online shopping. Lenient and hassle-free return processes have become increasingly crucial for retaining customers (Karlsson et al., 2023).

While P2 advocated a hassle-free approach, P1 discussed another strategy to improve customer experience. P1 emphasized, “understanding customer preferences throughout the sales cycle, especially regarding cell phones.” P1 said, “salespersons should know about products to ensure they recommend the most suitable device to each customer.” Knowledge is crucial for customer service success. While many companies empower employees with appropriate knowledge, depending on the nature of the business, empowering customers with knowledge can also enhance the customer experience (Gani & Maung, 2020). Creating a learning environment can improve business operations. When organizations develop their learning capabilities, they foster collaborative environments where individuals learn collectively (Migdadi, 2021). Aligning knowledge infrastructures with business models enables organizations to enhance outcomes (Ritola et al., 2022).

Additionally, P1 underscored the importance of “informing customers about alternative methods like direct fulfillment if the desired product is unavailable in-store.” Ishfaq & Raja (2018) argued fulfillment processes serve as retail distribution strategies, using distribution networks to satisfy customers’ orders. P1 stated, “potential risks of selling a product that customers might not be familiar with could lead to dissatisfaction later on.” P1 emphasized “ensuring that customers receive the right product tailored to their needs.” P1 stressed the importance of understanding customer preferences, being knowledgeable about different products, providing alternative fulfillment options, and ensuring customers are well-informed to avoid dissatisfaction. To ensure accurate and

consistent measurement, companies should implement standardized and reliable methods (Rane et al., 2023).

Moreover, P2 discussed “enhancing the self-service experience for customers, encouraging them to initiate returns online at any time rather than contacting the company by phone or email.” P2 said, “This move aims to provide a better customer experience by leveraging existing capabilities and improving the system.” P2 acknowledged “ seamless returns experience in maintaining customer loyalty.” Another notable aspect of e-commerce shopping is extended waiting periods customers often face when returning products (Wang et al., 2020). Customers now expect products to be easy to access and return, but a few supply chains have not adapted return strategies to manage associated costs (Espinosa et al., 2019). Customers could use retailer and e-tailer resources for returns, including websites, apps, and employees, so it is crucial for them to carefully design and manage each phase to ensure a seamless and customer-friendly experience (Saxena et al., 2022).

P1 discussed “the challenges professionals overseeing reverse logistics faced, emphasizing the issues with salespeople being incentivized merely to sell products, rather than ensuring the right accessories sold to customers.” Gupta et al. (2020) emphasize customer education can significantly impact customer behavior and satisfaction. Ritola et al. (2022) found companies embracing learning-based dynamic capabilities enhance their performance and develop effective long-term economic and environmental benefits strategies. Organizations that offer skill development programs may improve problem-solving, decision-making, communication, and leadership skills.

Customer feedback is crucial in identifying and addressing specific issues within a company's operations. In this context, P2 elaborated on the methods used to gather customer feedback, highlighting the importance of surveys and insights. Baden and Frei (2021) acknowledged that companies aiming to deliver excellent customer service and positive customer feedback have simplified the process of returning items. Hjort et al. (2019) indicated the most prominent and widely used practice is soliciting and listening to customer feedback. Companies may pinpoint areas of concern by systematically collecting and analyzing customer responses, such as delays and inefficiencies. Implementing this proactive approach may help resolve immediate problems and foster continuous improvement, ensuring the overall customer experience is enhanced and operational processes are optimized. An effective system for handling returns, complaints, and grievances creates mutual benefits and makes customers feel heard and valued (Lysenko-Ryba & Zimon 2021).

Integrating the resource-based approach will align well, emphasizing leveraging internal capabilities and resources to achieve a competitive advantage, as seen in the focus on refining systems and training staff to improve customer experience. Retail and e-tail businesses' internal resources and capabilities are critical to creating a seamless and positive customer experience. For example, P1 illustrates “how investing in training employees to improve their customer service skills is a strategic resource that can significantly enhance the customer experience.” That aligns with P2's emphasis on providing a seamless experience to foster customer retention and loyalty. Therefore, by effectively managing and deploying their internal resources, retail businesses can

enhance customer satisfaction and achieve long-term sustainability and a competitive edge in the market (Ployhart, 2021).

In this section, participants P1 and P2 share their insights on how a positive return experience provides their companies with a competitive advantage. Their perspectives align with the study's goal of understanding the impact of product returns on business success. Both participants emphasize that efficient and customer-friendly return processes enhance customer satisfaction and loyalty, which drives repeat business. Both participants highlighted the strategic importance of managing returns as a logistical challenge and a critical element of customer service and business strategy, aligning with the overall study. By efficiently managing returns, businesses can better allocate resources, minimize losses from returned goods, and build stronger customer relationships (Patale & Zohair, 2023).

Table 1

Enhancing Customer Experience

Participants	Interview Questions	References
P1	3	8
P2	1, 2	6

Theme 2: Mitigating RM Costs

Retailers, e-tailers, and manufacturers struggle to deal with the high costs associated with product returns. The second theme identified through data analysis was the importance of reducing returns management costs. P1 described "how their company transformed its reverse logistics, typically a cost center, into a profit center." P1 stated “that they developed a strategy that involved creating a dashboard for executives, which

displayed the costs associated with the logistics operations and the revenue generated from new processes they implemented." P1 described how "the processes included additional screening to ensure products were appropriately handled upon return, generating extra revenue, and offsetting the usual costs." Wilson & Goffnett (2022) indicated some companies have innovated reverse logistics processes to convert them from cost centers into profit centers. Huscroft et al. (2013) suggested that turning reverse logistics into a profit center enhances business operations by lowering return-related expenses and increasing residual value from returned items.

P1 discussed "how the company saved money on its testing and repair operations by reusing or harvesting parts from well-preserved phones, particularly avoiding the need to replace expensive cosmetic components." P1 described how "this approach aligned with the company's broader strategy by transforming a potential cost center into a revenue-contributing activity." Many retailers find it challenging to create practical solutions for their returns processes, particularly when balancing basic operational costs with the value consumers perceive in their return policies (Abdulla et al., 2022). Consequently, many firms' product return processes result in additional fees. Implementing adequate management strategies to manage product returns can significantly mitigate costs and improve overall business efficiency (Shah & Singh, 2021). P1 stated, "gives the actual cost of all the operations and all the touches."

Moreover, P2 stated that “the company is addressing delays in processing returns and issuing refunds, which previously depended on the physical return of products to the warehouse.” P2 discussed "evaluating the most effective shipping methods for returning

products.” P2 also mentioned that "the key considerations include choosing the right shipping mode partial, or LTL, etc., determining the best shipping routes to minimize touch points, and considering the costs of moving the product across regions, e.g., from the East Coast to the West Coast." Additionally, P2 said, "the team is focusing on improving the recovery percentage from suppliers, which is crucial for ensuring favorable return terms and timelines with suppliers.” P2 explained that "customers previously had to wait for a supplier to provide a return label, but now the company accepts returns directly at their distribution center (DC), incurring additional costs but enhancing customer satisfaction." P2 shared "that the primary method mentioned is obtaining supplier refunds." P2 stated, "If refunds aren't possible, P2 mentioned exploring other recovery avenues." The primary objective for these companies is to streamline the returns process and reduce associated costs, thereby transforming what was traditionally a loss-making area into a potential source of profit (Paula et al., 2020).

P1 discussed the challenge of dealing with locked iPhones returned to their stores. P1 stated, "Apple company would unlock them, but this changed over time." P1 said, "If a customer didn't unlock the phone during the return process or relocked it later, it became a costly problem for the organization." P1 also stated, "Apple unlocked these devices, but problems arose when customers failed to unlock them during returns or relocked them afterward, leaving the devices unusable. To address this, P1 said, "they developed a dashboard to track and communicate the status of returned iPhones to stores, highlighting instances where phones were locked."

P1 discusses a collaborative effort involving feedback on product costs and selection. P1 emphasized "discounting products in stores rather than pulling them back, aiming to enhance sales." P1 expressed “the logistical difficulties encountered during quarterly pullbacks, when stores are restocked with new accessories, leading to a high volume of returns and excessive product varieties stock keeping units (SKUs).” P1 also mentions “providing feedback to the product group about the inefficiency of stocking too many of certain items, like University of Wisconsin phone cases, which are not in high demand and often end up returned to the warehouse.”

A thorough cost analysis may help businesses identify areas where efficiency is improved, costs reduced, and overall process effectiveness can be enhanced. By adopting a resource-based view (RBV), these companies leverage their distinctive organizational resources and capabilities, transforming returns management from a mere liability into a strategic asset (Lukovszki et al., 2020). In reducing returns management costs, both P1 and P2 exemplify innovative strategies highlighting the crucial role of integrating returns management into the overall business strategy. One key strategy these participants employ is the innovation of their reverse logistics processes. Patale and Zohair (2023) discussed the importance of returns management in firms' reverse supply chain strategies and how online retailers integrate returns management into their competitive strategy for operational excellence. Companies can streamline operations, reduce costs, and improve customer satisfaction by fostering collaboration and resource sharing. Patale and Zohair (2023) found the role of returns management in enhancing sustainability by effectively managing returned goods.

For example, P1 has developed a sophisticated returns management system that uses advanced data analytics to predict return patterns and optimize inventory management. Similarly, P2 has implemented a collaborative approach by partnering with third-party logistics providers and other firms within their supply chain network. This partnership allows them to share resources and expertise, resulting in a more efficient and cost-effective returns management process. By pooling resources, P2 can achieve economies of scale, reducing the per-unit cost of handling returns and enhancing overall profitability. The innovative strategies employed by P1 and P2 in returns management, grounded in the resource-based view, demonstrate the significant benefits of integrating this function into the broader business strategy. Through collaboration, resource sharing, and a focus on sustainability, these firms have transformed returns management into a strategic asset, enhancing profitability and operational efficiency (Hyder et al., 2023). I applied the RBV theory to examine a company's resources and capabilities.

Table 2

Mitigating RM Costs

Participants	Interview Questions	References
P 1	1, 2, 5, 6, 7	12
P 2	1, 3	8

Theme 3: Aligning Adequate RM Strategies and Processes

RM strategies and processes are a critical component of supply chain management. Röllecke et al. (2018) and Rogers (2000) highlight various strategies and processes companies can adopt to manage returns effectively. The third theme identified through data analysis was the importance of aligning adequate returns management

strategies and processes. P1 outlined several steps in handling product returns to maximize efficiency and value recovery. P1 explained, "All products returned to the warehouse for assessment." P1 described, "Devices then undergo a cosmetic sorting process, graded from Grade A (almost new condition) to Grade D (likely heavily damaged)." P1 then described, "Based on these grades, decisions regarding the next steps for each product, including potential resale." P1 explained, "accessories based on their condition, with unopened items potentially returned to the shelf for sale, while others assessed for resale strategy." Recovering more value from returned products minimizes losses and transforms returns into a strategic asset (Zhang et al., 2023).

P2 provides further insights into critical considerations in the returns process. P2 stated, “Most returns were returned to suppliers, causing delays.” P2 said, “The company does not hold inventory but relies on suppliers to ship products directly to customers.” P2 shared, “While the return process is not yet seamless, it has significantly improved from the past.” P2 described “their company's previous process for handling customer returns, which was inefficient and led to poor customer experiences.” P2 stated, “The company lacked direct control over inventory, so when a customer requested a return, they had to coordinate with suppliers to obtain a return label.” P2 mentioned “the process could take anywhere from 30 minutes to several weeks, resulting in delays and customer dissatisfaction, particularly when customers were waiting for products and returned.” P2 said, “The company is addressing delays in processing returns and issuing refunds, which previously depended on the physical return of products to the warehouse.” These changes are steps toward a more efficient return process, aiming to eliminate the need for returns.

P2 shared, “A significant change in the company's return process is that previously, customers had to wait for the product to process before getting a refund.” P2 stated, “Now, the company has shifted responsibility away from customers, allowing refunds to be processed sooner based on supplier capabilities.” P2 also mentioned, “The company has set parameters for flagging certain customers but generally ensures timely refunds.” P2 also underscored “The company's commitment to improving the self-service experience for customers, demonstrating a proactive approach to streamlining returns processes.” Ambilkar et al. (2021) found customer satisfaction is crucial for successful returns management and is widely used to gauge the effectiveness of return processes. Documenting the condition of returned phones with photos taken by salespeople is an essential part of the company product returns process.

P1 described “a procedure where the company uses photos to document the condition of returned phones.” P1 stated, “If a phone is returned within the first 15 days and is significantly damaged, customer service representatives use the photos to explain to customers why they cannot receive a credit. This allows representatives to discuss alternative arrangements with the customers. Giving retailers insights into how customers perceive acceptable and unacceptable return behavior could assist in developing well-informed return policies and procedures (Robertson et al., 2020). The strategy aims to enhance the efficiency of the returns process and aligns well with supply chain management. Effective returns management requires close collaboration across various departments. For instance, P1 mentioned " the business strategy where initial payments are made based on a small percentage of the anticipated product sales, with additional

payments following after the product sold." P1 said, "They try to be creative in collaboration with partners and resellers, focusing on mutual benefits and innovative solutions." The strategy, which encourages innovative solutions and mutual benefits, proved successful through direct discussions and out-of-the-box thinking. Rintamäki et al. (2021) highlighted efficient management of customer interactions during returns is essential for a sustainable business advantage. For companies to be successful, they must identify the causes of returns and make substantial investments to address these issues (Ertekin et al., 2020).

P2 described "a close collaboration with the team and their marketing team." P2 said, "This partnership focuses on improving the self-service return experience for customers." P2 stated, "Both the front-end user experience and the back-end operations are necessary to facilitate returns." P2 emphasizes "the close and specific nature of this teamwork with the marketing department, encouraging innovation by allowing employees to propose new ideas." Röllecke et al. (2018) describe a collaborative approach within companies that involves aligning the objectives of different teams with those of other departments as an effective strategy ensuring that shared goals are made accessible across the organization, fostering a more integrated and practical approach to achieving company-wide objectives.

P1 mentioned, "Marketing is identified as a major stakeholder, highlighting its significant influence on the process." P1 noted, "Logistics is portrayed as a foundational element, seamlessly integrated to handle aspects like returns, managed through a return center." Additionally, P1 stated, "Decisions made at this point ensure the smooth

operation of logistics, reaffirming the importance of marketing and logistics in the system." P1 emphasized “the importance of close coordination with the marketing and store operations teams, integrating efforts to optimize product management and sales tactics.” In their exploration of returns management, Röllecke et al. (2018) and Karlsson et al. (2023) highlight the diverse metrics employed by retailers to evaluate returns programs, emphasizing the need for tailored approaches aligned with specific program goals. Röllecke et al. (2018) and Karlsson et al. (2023) underscore effective measurement systems facilitate data-driven decision-making, guide organizational attention, and foster adaptive strategies. Moreover, P1's strategic implementation approach, focusing on incremental ROI demonstration and partnerships with established e-commerce platforms, illustrates practical steps toward adequate returns management.

Effective returns management strategies, as highlighted by Röllecke et al. (2018) and Karlsson et al. (2023), involve comprehensive processes such as reverse logistics, workflow management, and close cross-functional collaboration, which can transform returns from a cost burden into a strategic asset. For example, detailed assessment and grading of returned products, as described by P1, allow companies to recover more value from returned items, turning potential losses into assets. Lubis (2022) noted this approach emphasizes continuous improvement, collaborative strategies, and efficient resource utilization to bolster overall business performance.

Moreover, by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the returns process, companies can enhance customer satisfaction, which is a critical intangible resource. The proactive approach to handling customer returns, addressing inefficiencies, and ensuring

timely refunds, as described by P2, further illustrates how these internal processes and capabilities can differentiate a company from its competitors, leading to sustained business success. Thus, by integrating returns management strategies into their core operations and continuously innovating these processes, firms can harness their internal resources to gain and maintain a competitive edge in the market. In the Resource-Based View (RBV) theory context, returns management may be considered a strategic asset that provides a competitive advantage. Lubis (2022) elaborates on the resource-based view's assessment of internal resources, such as capabilities and unique assets, which firms leverage to achieve sustained competitive advantages. According to Barney and Clark (2007), firms gain sustainable competitive benefits through unique resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable.

Table 3

Aligning Adequate RM Strategies and Processes

Participants	Interview Questions	References
P1	1, 8, 6	12
P2	1,6	13

Applications to Professional Practice

My research provides valuable insights for businesses to enhance their returns management practices and effectively handle product returns. I explored how these findings apply to professional business practices, focusing on management strategies and processes to improve product returns. Retail supply chain and logistics managers are particularly interested in improving product returns through effective management strategies and methods. With the increasing volume of product returns, proactive

measures by retail managers are essential to address associated challenges, as ineffective measures may significantly hinder returns processes. Participants emphasized that enhancing product returns is crucial for organizational success, customer satisfaction, and overall performance. Three key themes emerged from participant interviews: improving customer experience, mitigating returns management costs, and aligning adequate returns management processes.

The critical role of customer experience emphasizes that lenient and hassle-free return policies attract customers, boost repeat purchases, and foster loyalty and satisfaction (Rintamäki et al., 2021). The research highlights that businesses can achieve higher satisfaction and loyalty by prioritizing customer needs and preferences, enhancing profitability and long-term sustainability. Retailers should focus on adapting to changes and variations in customer experience to improve satisfaction further and maintain a sustainable competitive edge (Pei et al., 2020). This approach meets customer expectations and builds a robust and loyal customer base, ensuring continued growth and success in a competitive market. Retail businesses that consistently refine their return policies and customer service strategies create a more appealing shopping environment, encouraging customers to return and make additional purchases. Integrating this proactive approach to customer experience management is essential for achieving lasting success and securing a favorable position in the marketplace.

The study highlights the significance of reducing returns management costs. Reducing returns management costs is crucial for creating a sustainable, profitable, and growth-oriented business. Shah and Singh (2021) emphasize that optimizing

transportation routes, consolidating returns, and minimizing processing times are effective strategies to reduce the financial burden of returns and enhance overall profitability. The study underscores the importance of these measures in mitigating returns management costs. Businesses can transform returns management into a strategic advantage by focusing on cost mitigation strategies. Karlsson et al. (2023) found that mitigating returns management costs directly impacts customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and profitability, highlighting the growing importance of returns management in modern business practices.

The study highlights the significance of aligning adequate returns management strategy and processes, which is crucial for retail companies. Hjort et al. (2019) highlight that many firms struggle due to unclear goals and fragmented policies in handling returns. Effective alignment of returns management strategies and processes with broader business objectives can yield practical outcomes and sustain operational efficiency. Patale and Zohair (2023) noted this strategic alignment goes beyond cost containment; it integrates returns management into overall business strategy to enhance performance.

By integrating returns management strategically, companies reduce financial losses and enhance customer satisfaction with faster, more reliable processing. This proactive approach lowers overhead costs and cultivates innovation and adaptability. Therefore, aligning a robust returns management strategy and process with business goals is crucial for optimizing operational efficiency and achieving sustainable business growth.

Implications for Social Change

Supply chain and logistics managers might use the findings of this case study to improve social change by mitigating returns management costs, enhancing customer experience, and aligning adequate returns management strategies and processes. Companies that engage in practices promoting positive social change may profoundly impact the economic development of the local communities. Integrating green and social practices into supply chains helps reduce environmental impact, enhance social well-being, and provide competitive advantages (Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2020). Managing product returns effectively has become crucial for companies to meet regulatory requirements and align with growing consumer expectations around sustainability (Wilson & Goffnett, 2022). Returns management practices align with sustainability goals and offer potential cost savings and improved customer satisfaction. Mathiyazhagan et al. (2020) highlight how companies benefit from rethinking their supply chain networks to manage the reverse flow of products through recycling, refurbishing, or responsible disposal of returned items. Frei et al. (2020a) emphasized streamlining returns processes to mitigate product returns, reduce environmental impact, and enhance overall profitability. Incorporating sustainability into supply management, including product returns management, is a critical area of focus. Companies may reduce waste, improve resource utilization, and enhance sustainability by adopting sustainable returns management practices (Mathiyazhagan et al., 2020).

Recommendations for Action

The business problem addressed in this study was that ineffective strategies and processes supply chain and logistics managers employ to handle product returns negatively impact business profitability and competitiveness. Through thorough data analysis, the study unveils strategies and processes that are instrumental in effectively and efficiently managing product returns. Based on the findings from this study, I recommend that supply chain and logistics managers emphasize three pivotal areas: enhancing the customer experience, mitigating returns management costs, and aligning adequate returns management strategies and processes. These areas are critical focal points for driving operational excellence and fostering sustainable growth within the supply chain. Frei et al. (2020a) emphasized supply chain and logistics managers leverage a multifaceted approach to navigate the complexities of product returns to improve business practices. Enhancing the customer experience emerges as a cornerstone of effective product returns management. By streamlining return procedures, offering hassle-free return options, and providing timely resolution to customer grievances, managers can cultivate a sense of trust and loyalty among consumers (Phau et al., 2022). Furthermore, the study underscores the imperative of mitigating returns management costs to bolster profitability and competitiveness. Frei et al. (2022) highlight the multifaceted benefits of returns management, and by treating returned products as valuable assets, companies can enhance customer loyalty and improve their profitability and competitiveness.

By streamlining the process of handling returns, ensuring quick and efficient processing, and minimizing the resources spent on managing returned goods, companies can reduce the financial impact of returns, improve customer satisfaction, and enhance operational effectiveness (Shah & Singh, 2021). Aligning an adequate returns management strategy and process with the organization's business goals is crucial. Karlsson et al. (2023) explained integrating a returns management strategy and process helps effectively contribute to the organization's desired outcomes by aligning returns management strategies and processes with overall business objectives.

By adhering to these recommendations, supply chain and logistics managers may alleviate the burden on their bottom line while enhancing operational efficiency and customer satisfaction. I explored the intricate strategies and processes supply chain and logistics managers employ to manage product returns effectively and efficiently. By improving customer experience, mitigating returns management costs, and aligning an adequate returns management strategy, managers may unlock new opportunities for growth and differentiation in an increasingly competitive marketplace. I plan to share the study analysis with the participants once I complete my study. I intend to use my research to help retail supply chain management professionals. I also plan to publish my research in supply chain management, logistics publication, and business management publication.

Recommendations for Further Research

Some limitations exist in this research. One limitation of this study was the difficulty in accessing company documents, which prevented me from using organizational records to support data triangulation. While this limitation might narrow

the scope of evidence, the study's validity and reliability can remain strong if these challenges are acknowledged and addressed systematically. Another limitation was the sample size, which included only two senior supply chain/logistics managers. This limited scope affects the generalizability of the findings to other organizations or industries. Although the case companies varied in geographical location, they were all based in the Midwest of the United States. I also recommend that future researchers conduct a study exploring supply chain and logistics managers' strategies and processes to handle product returns in the global retail and e-tail industry. Future researchers could include a more diverse sample of supply chain/logistics professionals from different geographic regions to enhance the study's applicability. Additionally, employing quantitative methods could provide a deeper examination of the effectiveness of returns management strategies and processes. By exploring quantitative methods, future researchers can study the connections between different variables, such as returns management strategies and processes, customer experience, and the costs associated with managing returns, to identify patterns, measure impacts, and make data-driven recommendations.

Reflections

I encountered several rejections from participants to participate in my research study. I thought accessing supply chain or logistics managers would be easy; surprisingly, that was not the case. However, I was able to access two supply chain/logistics senior managers who were willing to participate in my research study. The two senior supply chain managers acted as gatekeepers, granting me access to other supply chain or

logistics employees for interviews. However, those supply chain managers and employees did not want to participate in the study.

Pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) has been an enlightening journey of significant self-reflection and personal growth. Authoring a research study can lead to frustration and stress. Although I considered quitting several times, I refused to succumb to despair. Instead, I renewed my efforts and remained determined to overcome the hurdles between me and my goals. Throughout this process, I learned experiences that helped me better understand how supply chain managers implement strategies and processes for managing product returns. I recognize that my limited knowledge of returns management can have unintentionally affected the interpretation of findings. Completing the DBA doctoral study will profoundly impact my professional practice and research in returns management, transforming my thinking and fostering greater humility and openness to diverse viewpoints.

Conclusion

Through a thorough investigation, this qualitative multiple-case study aims to explore management strategies and processes that improve product returns. I uncovered how managers develop and implement effective and efficient strategies and processes to manage product returns. The essence of the findings underscores the importance of developing returns management strategies and processes tailored to the organization. Prioritizing customers' experience enhancement through streamlined returns processes enables organizations to strengthen their competitive position and build lasting customer relationships. Moreover, the study explores innovation in returns management and

concentrates on cost mitigation. By developing and deploying innovative strategies and processes to manage return-related expenses effectively, companies can protect their profitability and strengthen their competitive edge. Strategic foresight mitigates financial liabilities and cultivates a culture of operational excellence and adaptability. Furthermore, integrating robust returns management strategies and processes transcends mere operational necessity; it emerges as a linchpin in the broader quest for sustained organizational success.

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Appendix A: Semistructured Technique Interview Questions

Research Question:

What returns management strategies and processes do supply chain/logistics managers use to manage product returns effectively and efficiently?

Interview Questions:

1. What key returns management strategies and derivative business processes do you use?
2. How do you apply returns management strategies and processes to fit your organization's strategic business plan?
3. How do you manage product returns to prevent returns from directly affecting the organization's revenue/sales?
4. Based on your experience, what elements of the returns management strategies and processes have led to customer satisfaction?
5. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the returns management processes?
6. How are marketing and logistics functional areas integrated into the returns management strategy and process?
7. What key external factors were considered in developing your organization's returns management strategy and process?
8. What other pertinent information would you like to share regarding your organization's key returns management strategies and processes?

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Send each participant a calendar invitation for the agreed date and time. Include the location, Skype link, or telephone number in the invitation.

2. Send a reminder to each participant the day before the interview.

3. Begin with an introduction and greeting to establish rapport, restate the purpose of the research, and review the consent form that the participant confirmed via email.

4. Check to validate they received an email copy of the written consent form.

5. Review the participant's consent and option to withdraw from the interview process.

6. Request permission to record the interview.

7. Start the audio recording device.

8. State the overarching research question.

9. Using a semi-structured interview format, ask the eight interview questions. Include interview probes as needed.

10. Request access to policies, process documents, or metrics reports.

11. Stop the audio recording device at the end of the interview.

12. Discuss member checking with the participant.

13. Thank the participant and reiterate contact details for follow-up questions or concerns.

14. Assure the participant that all information will be confidential.

15. Advise participants that they will obtain a copy of the transcribed interpretation of the audio recording.