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Public Relations as an Approach for SMEs to Improve Business Sustainability

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Public Relations as an Approach for SMEs to Improve Business Sustainability

by

Nikkia McClain

MPS, George Washington University, 2017

BA, Metropolitan College of New York, 2007

Research Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

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May 2025

Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) often lack dedicated public relations (PR) departments, limiting their ability to build brand identity, and gain market share compared to larger firms with greater resources. Small business owners need PR departments to improve their competitive positioning to satisfy buyers. stay competitive to maintain and increase employment, and satisfy customers. Grounded in the dynamic capability theory, this qualitative multiple case study explored how the development and strategic implementation of PR functions can provide SMEs with a competitive advantage. Participants included seven SME owners in fashion, real estate, beauty, business, technology, and retail, each with experience in increasing PR investment to enhance organizational performance. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, company documents, and surveys. Thematic analysis from Yin's five phases, compiling, disassembling, reassembling, clarifying, and concluding, was used to analyze the data. Four themes emerged: (a) collaborative public relations efforts across SME networks; (b) strategic public relations investment improves sustainability; (c) early public relations implementation reduces the need for extensive in-house public relations departments; and (d) low-cost promotional tools can enhance value and impact. A key recommendation is that SMEs prioritize early development and implement a strategic public relations plan to enhance brand identity, foster sustainability, and ensure long-term competitiveness. The implications for positive social change include the potential for SME owners to increase community employment and the local tax base to improve the local economy and promote social development.

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Dedication

This study is wholeheartedly dedicated to my incredible family. First and foremost, I thank my amazing husband, Roy, who has been my unwavering rock, and our wonderful children, Taasheim, Kimara, Kyla, and Tyr, who have been my constant source of inspiration. They have witnessed firsthand the sacrifices I've made, the late nights, the missed moments, and the sheer determination it has taken to reach this point in my life of becoming Dr. Nikkia McClain. They have seen me push my limits and prove to myself that anything is possible with hard work and perseverance. I also want to express my deepest gratitude to every friend and sister (especially you, Glossy!) who has cheered me on throughout this doctoral journey. Your unwavering support and encouragement, calls and messages checking in, and belief in my abilities have meant the world to me. You have all been my cheerleaders, and I am so grateful to have you in my life. Hearing you call me "Dr. McClain" has constantly reminded me of my goals and has fueled my motivation to keep going even when things got tough. Lastly, I am dedicating this final study to myself! The overachiever who set out on a mission during COVID-19 to accomplish a goal has done it yet again!

Acknowledgments

I want to express my deepest gratitude to God. Without my unwavering faith and trust in His divine plan, I would not have persevered and overcome the many challenges and obstacles I faced. As a young mother of two children before the age of 18, I faced numerous societal expectations and stereotypes that suggested that my path was limited. However, I refused to let these external pressures define me or my future. I knew that I had the potential to achieve great things, and I was determined to break down barriers and prove that anything is possible with hard work, dedication, and unwavering faith. I knew that education was the key to unlocking my full potential, so I worked tirelessly to balance my responsibilities as a mother with my academic pursuits. I am proud to be among the 2% of individuals in the United States who hold a doctoral degree, and I am even prouder to have defied the odds and overcome the many challenges I faced along the way.

I would like to thank every professor at Walden University who has contributed to my academic journey. Your guidance and support throughout my coursework, residency, and the proposal process have been invaluable. I want to extend a special thanks to my first chair, Dr. James Glenn. Your expertise, patience, and encouragement have played a significant role in my success. Every doctoral candidate needs a chair like you!

Dr. Peter Bush, thank you for your support and mentorship.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) need to find innovative approaches to remain relevant in business. Public relations and effective communication are vital for a business of any magnitude. Nonetheless, SMEs often fail to have the resources to fund or incorporate public relations departments. Kotler and Amstrong (2016) agreed that if SMEs want to remain financially viable, and have sustainability, and public awareness of their company, product, or services is their best resource.

Background of the Problem

After experiencing COVID-19 small businesses had to pivot, scale or take new approaches to remain relevant in business. Public relations and effective communication are vital for a business of any magnitude. Shadinger (2020) stated that when small businesses do not implement public relations, it broadens the gap among their competitors. However, small business owners often lack the resources to hire a long-term publicist or a public relations agency. Kotler and Amstrong (2016) agreed that if small business owners want to remain financially viable, they need economic sustainability, and public awareness of their company, product or services is their best resource.

Problem Statement

Due to a lack of resources like personnel and capital, small business owners should consider implementing public relations departments to close the branding gap between them and larger corporations for economic sustainability. Polic and Solopek (2020) stated small companies give the importance of public relations minimal attention due to a lack of resources and personnel, while some businesses understand the viability of using public relations to improve their brand and profitability. The general business

problem is that some small businesses lack the public relations strategies to improve branding and the financial resources to publicize their company, which often leads to business failure. The specific business problem is that some small businesses lack public relations strategies to compete against larger corporations because they lack resources for obtaining financing to fund public relations departments to remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore how small business owners who lack public relations strategies to compete against larger corporations because they lack resources for obtaining financing to fund public relations departments, can remain competitive and profitable as their larger peers. The implication for social change is that with economic sustainability through public relations, small and medium-size enterprises can create additional jobs that provide economic growth.

Population and Sampling

The targeted population consists of small business owners generating a minimum of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars in revenue located in the northeast region of the United States and have demonstrated the ability to promote their business through public relations initiatives. The implication for social change is that with economic sustainability through public relations, small and medium-size enterprises can create additional jobs that provide economic growth.

Nature of the Study

There are three research methodologies quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method. A quantitative method examines the relationships among quantitative variables

to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Qualitative research methods vary broadly and include narrative inquiry, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, process research, and action research (Shufutinsky, 2020). The mixed-method approach combines both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques and analytical procedures. The qualitative methodology was used in this study. It uses various data collection techniques and analytical procedures to develop a conceptual framework and theoretical contribution to the research. This research study includes interviews that gather data from a sampling population of small business entrepreneurs and questionnaires to collect data. Qualitative research uses qualitative data collection tools to examine specific cases and events in their natural environments (Ezer & Aksüt, 2021). A qualitative process was used to understand the perceptions and experiences of individuals.

A quantitative research design examines the relationship between variables, measured numerically and analyzed through various inferential statistical techniques to prove or disprove a hypothesis. Similarly, mixed methods use both qualitative and quantitative methods simultaneously in research. However, my study did not involve exploring the relationships between variables, so the quantitative or mix-method design would not work for my doctoral study.

Research Question

What strategies do SMEs use to finance their public relations departments to improve branding and to remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers?

Interview Questions

1. How has public relations helped your business as a small business owner?

2. As a successful small business owner, what are some public relations strategies incorporated within your business model?
3. What specific public relations strategies have you implemented?
4. What were public relations strategies successful for your business?
5. How do you measure business success when it comes to public relations?
6. What public relations strategies have saved you time and money to help your business?
7. What promotional strategies outside of public relations are you using now to help position your business ahead of competitors?
8. How are you positioning your businesses to pivot?
9. When do you implement a budget for public relations for the business?
10. What have been successfully paid tools incorporated into your business plan to help promote your business?

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The theory supporting this study on the sustainability of public relations strategies for small businesses is organizational capabilities theory. The organizational capabilities theory was developed by David Collis in 1994. This theory explores how businesses can build a competitive advantage by developing unique organizational capabilities rather than focusing on products or services alone. Amiri et al. (2023) stated competitive advantage and sustainability of business organizations can only be achieved when an organization identifies, boosts, and directs its resources toward building its capabilities. The theory also refers to an organization's prowess in accomplishing a collective mission by efficiently utilizing its available resources. Donthu and Gustafsson (2020) argued that

it is becoming challenging for most businesses across the world to keep their financial wheels rolling, given reduced revenues and the high level of uncertainty. Understanding organizational capability is crucial for developing optimal strategies for organizational success among SMEs.

The capability-based view of business strategy has become increasingly popular among managers and scholars. This approach suggests that organizations should continuously build and improve their core competencies to stay ahead of their competitors. According to this theory, success is achieved by developing superior capabilities rather than relying on traditional elements such as cost reduction and efficiency. Research has demonstrated that firms with higher capabilities are more likely to outperform their rivals over the long term.

Operational Definitions

Business: A business is an organization or entity providing consumer goods and services. Business refers to an economic process involving exchanging goods, services, or both for money. It is essential in the ever-evolving economy as it provides employment opportunities and produces valuable products and services.

Communication: As argued by Tworzydło et al. (2020), communication is the key process to increase understanding and achieve goals accordingly. Communication is conveying information from one individual to another. The term is often used in business communication, essential to an organization's success. Communication represents a phenomenon that is at one and the same time ubiquitous yet elusive, prosaic yet mysterious, straightforward yet frustratingly prone to failure (Hargie, 2021).

Entrepreneurship: Terán et al. (2020) stated entrepreneurship is a mechanism with which to generate economic benefits. This process can involve creating something new, such as a new product or service, or improving an existing business model.

Finances: The meaning of finances is an ever-evolving concept. It can encompass both the science of money and its impact on economic systems. Finances are not just about earning, saving, investing, or spending. They also represent the power of making decisions that significantly affect the finances of a business.

Marketing: Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that value customers, clients, partners, and society. Marketing is used to create, keep, and satisfy the customer (Kotler & Armstrong, 2006).

Profitability: Profitability is defined as a measure of profitability, which measures a company's profitability by tracking its financial performance against its competitors. Indicating how much money a business makes compared to what it spends on overhead or operating costs. Profitability is the main element to consider while assessing an organization's performance since it shows the profit margin comparable to asset investment, equity, or sale (Nguyen, 2020).

Public relations: Public relations is recognized as an organizational boundary-spanning function accountable for communication engagement with diverse stakeholders in ways that facilitate social relationships, co-creation, and communication (Hurst & Johnston, 2021).

Small and medium enterprises (SME): SME is short for small-to-medium enterprises. The term SME is convenient for segmenting businesses and other

organizations. Businesses that employ fewer than 250 employees (Chong et al., 2019). SMEs are usually defined by their employee count, revenues, or some combination of the two. However, there is yet to be a universally accepted definition of SME.

Small businesses: According to the U.S. small business administration (2010), a small business is considered a privately owned corporation, partnership, or sole proprietorship with fewer employees and less annual revenue than a corporation or regular-sized business.

Sustainability: The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) stated that sustainability is defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

In any research study, several assumptions are made to reach valid conclusions. First and foremost, it is assumed that the data collected is accurate and representative of the population. Additionally, it is assumed that the people being studied are unaware of the research study, and their behavior is not influenced by the fact that they are being observed. Another assumption is that the research study is ethical and that the participants have informed consent. Finally, it is assumed that the researchers are competent and unbiased in their data analysis. While these assumptions may seem minor, they can majorly impact the validity of a research study. As such, researchers need to be aware of them and take steps to ensure that they are not compromising the results of their study. It is common for assumptions to be made before conducting any research, from formulating hypotheses to setting out a methodology. At the same time, assumptions can

limit our understanding as assumptions may exist without the researcher being aware that they are present. In any research field, assumptions should be stated and questioned to avoid future errors in interpretation or bias. By doing so, assumptions prevent assumptions from merging with fact and can help to provide a comprehensive and accurate overview of the field being studied.

Limitations

Any research study will have limitations. These limitations can arise from many factors, including the sample size, the data collection method, and the specific characteristics of the studied population. All of these factors can contribute to limitations in a research study. For example, a study with a small sample size may need to produce reliable results. Similarly, a study that relies on self-reported data may be subject to bias. The population's specific nature can limit even well-designed studies. For instance, a study on educational attainment may need to be able to generalize to other populations. Limitations are an inherent part of any research study, and it is essential to be aware of them when interpreting the results of a study.

When conducting research studies, limitations are an inevitable part of the process. These limitations can stem from various sources, such as inadequate funding, time constrictions, lack of data or resources, or limitations imposed by ethical standards. It is important to recognize and acknowledge limitations when compiling research results so that readers better understand the study’s objectives and their potential reach within the given parameters. No matter how carefully researchers plan their experiments, limitations remain and should be noted when disseminating results to ensure validity and accuracy.

Delimitations

Delimitations are the boundaries set in place to define the limitations of a research study. Delimitations can include the geographical area being studied, the study's time frame, the type of participants included in the study, and more. Delimitations are important because they help to focus a research study and make it more manageable. Without delimitations, a research study could quickly become too broad and unwieldy. As a result, it is crucial for researchers to carefully consider the delimitations of their study before beginning their work.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses the issue of improving financing strategies needed for businesses to publicize their company which can contribute to reaching economic sustainability. The failure of small businesses results in psychological, social, and financial turmoil for small business leaders. Mohammed and Jawula (2021) believed when small businesses need more financial resources to publicize their company, it can contribute to their failure to reach economic sustainability after several years. Warren and Szostek (2017) stated that small businesses account for approximately 50% of all jobs yet need more resources to stay economically sustainable beyond 5 years.

Contribution to Business Practice

This research study can assist small business owners when they create public relations departments, thus closing the gap between them and their larger peers. This strategy will help them remain competitive and profitable as their larger peers. Public relations is an approach that small business owners could implement to add value to their business through earned media, public awareness, social media campaigns, and effective

brand communication. The increased focus on public relations' role in change management parallels the importance of public relations' role as "change agent," which places the emphasis on action not only communicating the importance of change but also being the central agent to create it (Mundy, 2021). Sutherland et al. (2020) believed this specialization, often referred to as social care or social customer service, has been promoted and discussed heavily in industry circles and publications, but not in academic research.

Implications for Social Change

The implication for social change is when SMEs create strong public relations strategies and implement them into their business model from the beginning, it can lead to business growth. The power of public relations in social change cannot be underestimated. When small businesses prioritize strong and effective PR strategies, they can drive not only business growth but also contribute to positive changes in society. SMEs with strong public relations strategies are well-positioned for success. They have the potential to create more job opportunities and increase profitability, which ultimately leads to community or societal philanthropy. Fehrer et al. (2022) believed public relations can facilitate value cocreation processes between broad sets of stakeholders that drive positive social change, and shape institutional arrangements in general and public discourse in particular.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

This section of my research study is based on the academic literature reviewed supporting the research question of what strategies business owners use to improve financing strategies to improve their public relations departments and branding to

compete against more giant corporations to remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers. It will provide a foundation for understanding organizational capabilities theory and that an organization's capabilities can influence its decision-making and performance, including its decision to finance public relations and marketing departments. Page et al. (2021) stated that the procedure of selecting eligible literature is divided into identification, screening, and inclusion in line with the steps of reporting systematic reviews proposed. I have critically analyzed these works of literature, which include peer-reviewed articles and journals, and compiled them within the context of my research study. To provide meaningful conclusions and implications on how different organizations can better manage their finances and make smarter decisions regarding their public relations investments. As part of my research study, I am leveraging organizational capabilities theory to dive deeper into the academic literature and identify underlying trends that provide better insight into how companies approach these investments. Some literature has argued for a number of important work-related Functionings (which they variously term “capabilities” or “capacities”), with frequent references in this literature to a “capability / capacity” to aspire (Hobson & Zimmermann, 2022).

Examining academic literature provides a solid foundation for making better-informed decisions that ultimately lead to more successful outcomes. Peer review has a key role in ensuring that information published in scientific journals is as truthful, valid and accurate as possible (Steer & Ernst, 2021). Through this research and analysis, I am uncovering previously little-explored connections and helping businesses reap the rewards of thoughtfully planned public relations and marketing initiatives. This

organization of the literature chosen demonstrates the interrelationship between themes, concepts, and theories related to how different organizations can effectively manage their finances and make sound decisions regarding their public-relations investments. A sophisticated literature review can result in a robust dissertation by scrutinizing the main problem examined by the academic study; anticipating research hypotheses, methods and results; and maintaining the interest of the audience in how the dissertation will provide solutions for the current gaps in a particular field (Leite et al., 2019). In particular, this study aims to show how organizations can use data to structure financial decision-making and strategically manage public relations activities. It strives to offer insights into the potential costs associated with certain decisions and the reputation benefits that go hand-in-hand with effective communication strategies. By arranging the literature in this manner, a holistic picture of financial organization and decision-making process could be drawn to understand how SMEs can improve their public relations and marketing departments.

When researching topics, it included the following keywords: *public relations, communication, marketing, sustainability, small businesses,* and *entrepreneurship*. The keywords used for the selection of the articles is an essential input for the bibliometric analysis, thus setting the breadth of the study (Molina-Collado et al., 2022). I searched through databases such as Ebsco, ABI/INFORM, Walden University Library, Sage, and LexisNexis Academic. This was done to obtain a comprehensive overview of the various components involved with each topic and to provide the most up-to-date resources available. Keywords refer to important words or concepts that represent the research foci and theoretical backgrounds of an academic study and enable readers to glean a quick

impression about what they are going to read from an academic article (Corrin et al., 2022). I chose specific keywords to ensure that the most relevant information about my research was obtained. The results provided an informed basis for further investigation into the keywords specified.

Table 1

Details of Literature Review by Year of Publication

	Older than 5 years	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total
Books	4	0	0	0	0	0	4
Government documents	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Other sources	2	1	3	3	0	0	9
Peer-reviewed articles	2	4	10	24	7	4	51
Total	9	5	13	27	7	4	65

Introduction to Organizational Capabilities Theory

Organizational capabilities theory is a comprehensive approach to defining and measuring an organization's overall capabilities. It provides a structured view of all factors influencing organizational performance and creates a framework for strategically designing and managing efficient operations. Small and micro-businesses can gain new knowledge and information about their products and services through business networking with their customers and suppliers (Mohamada & Chinb, 2019). The theory also helps to identify areas of internal strengths and weaknesses to help organizations evaluate their strategies and modify them as needed. Collecting information from different aspects of the business, such as customers, employees, partners, processes, and resources. Resources are the organization's tangible assets, such as human capital, financial resources, technology infrastructure, and operational systems. Processes refer to the activities necessary for an operation to achieve its objectives. Customer focus involves understanding and responding to customer needs in a timely manner.

Performance measures assess whether an organization is meeting its goals and delivering value to stakeholders, bridging the gap between strategic objectives and daily operations for greater overall success. Pratama et al. (2022) argued enterprise (organizational) capabilities is vastly diverse and consists of different contexts.

SMEs can benefit from utilizing the organizational capabilities framework when strategizing about financing its public relations departments. This holistic system allows for meaningful insights into all facets of the operations, enabling organizations to identify room for growth and establish goals to make improvements. By implementing this dynamic structure, companies are equipped with key elements needed to craft a unified vision, ultimately achieving high-impact communication objectives across the organization.

Application of Theory to the Applied Business Problem

To successfully apply organizational capabilities theory to the applied business problem, organizations must understand available resources. This includes understanding the company's current capabilities, identifying areas for improvement, and developing processes to ensure that the resources and capabilities are used effectively. In addition, organizations should be able to assess their own resources continuously to keep up with changes such as technology or disruptive competition.

This study aimed to uncover the financing strategies that SMEs use to improve their public relations departments and strengthen their branding. This research, conducted through a structured inquiry involving keywords such as “financing,” “public relations,” and “branding,” provides valuable insights into how SMEs can successfully compete against larger corporations while remaining competitive and profitable in an ever-

changing business landscape. This study is expected to contribute to the larger body of knowledge on business success through effective public relations efforts by investigating SMEs' various financing strategies. According to Shadinger (2020), when small businesses do not implement public relations, the gap between them and their competitors widens. On the other hand, small business owners frequently need more resources to hire a long-term publicist or public relations agency. Kotler and Amstrong (2016) agreed that if small business owners want to remain financially viable, they need economic sustainability, and public awareness of their company, product, or services is their best resource.

It is critical to consider the implementation of improved financial strategies and increasing resources to develop public relations departments as a key component in enhancing the success of a small business. Without proper branding and successful promotion of products, services, and the company itself, such businesses may struggle to attract customers, build consumer loyalty, and gain market share. As a result, small businesses must have vital public relations departments equipped with effective methods and tactics to maximize market visibility, resulting in increased sales and greater sustainability. Failure to improve their financial strategies will result in an insufficient resource base from which a public relations department can draw, potentially disrupting branding activities, decreasing market share, and possibly resulting in business failure.

Evolution of Organizational Capabilities Theory

The origins of organizational capabilities can be traced back to economist Joseph Schumpeter, who argued that businesses must continually innovate to remain successful (Schumpeter, 1934). Schumpeter (1934) argued that more is needed for a business to

produce goods or services, it must continuously develop new capabilities and find ways to stay ahead of the competition. Schumpeter's ideas have become widely accepted, and his work has helped shape many of the strategies and practices businesses use today. His legacy has profoundly impacted how we think about entrepreneurship and innovation, and his ideas continue to shape how we approach business. Other economists, including Peter Drucker and Gary Hamel, later expanded upon Schumpeter's work. In particular, Drucker identified four key capabilities that firms must possess to remain competitive: knowledge, skills, processes, and resources (Drucker & Heenan, 2008). These capabilities allow a company to develop innovative products or services, better understand customer needs and react quickly to changes in the marketplace.

Chandler (1992) once asked how various established theories, including neoclassical, principal-agent, transaction cost, and evolutionary theories, align with the historical perspective on the growth of modern industrial firms. This inquiry aimed to delve into the relationship between these theories and the evolution of firms throughout history. Organizational capabilities, honed by limited competition, provided the dynamic not only for the continuing growth of these firms but also for the industries they dominated and the national economies in which they operated. Core organizational capabilities are based on "a hierarchy of practiced organizational routines, which define lower order organizational skills, and how these are coordinated, and higher order decision procedures for choosing what is to be done at lower levels (Chandler, 1992).

David Collis, a prominent scholar in management, is known for his pioneering work on organizational capabilities theory. His research outlines four critical organizational capabilities categories: strategic, operational, financial, and human resources. The first

category focuses on a firm's ability to perform basic functional activities (Collis, 1994). The second category highlights the importance of dynamic improvements in the firm's activities, such as continuous improvement (Collis, 1994). The third category underscores the ability to recognize the intrinsic value of other resources or to develop novel strategies before competitors and the final category emphasizes the importance of higher-order or meta-capabilities, which enable the firm to learn to learn capabilities (Collis, 1994).

Winter (2003) proposed that there are zero-level capabilities, also called operational or ordinary capabilities, which he defines as those that permit the firm to earn a living in the present. Then he explains that first-level capabilities modify and change zero-level capabilities. He also suggests, similarly to Collis (1994), that higher-order capabilities operate on the first-level capabilities. In today's digital age, the dynamic needs of businesses have forced the evolution of organizational capabilities. Wang et al. (2021) believed that traditional business models are being rewritten. In a networked economy and rapidly changing environment, the capability to engage in collaborative value creation and joint innovation activities has become increasingly important for companies (Laasonen, 2023).

Firms of all industries are nowadays developing innovation to guarantee their success in the markets (Saunila, 2020). Rapid advancements in technology demand that companies adapt and enhance their capabilities to stay ahead of their rivals and achieve success. Annarelli et al. (2021) argued that digitalization capabilities represent an important precondition for companies to secure a sustained competitive advantage. In a highly competitive market, the agility to respond promptly and effectively to shifting

market trends is critical to business prosperity. Therefore, companies should consistently innovate their capabilities to remain relevant, competitive, and keep pace with industry trends. By focusing on business capabilities and omitting other details of the business (i.e. technology used, people involved, system employed), complex business matters can be readily digested by both IT and business, and executives and planning teams (Ulrich & Rosen, 2011).

An organizational capability framework helps firms identify areas of strength and weakness within their organization to make strategic decisions about where to invest resources and effort. Ultimately, this will allow them to anticipate customer needs better and react quickly when market conditions change. Developing organizational capabilities is an ongoing process, and companies must continually strive to stay ahead of the competition to succeed. By leveraging their capabilities and staying on top of market trends, businesses can gain a competitive edge in today's economy.

Facets of Organizational Capabilities Theory

Dynamic Capability

Dynamic capabilities are distinct processes that set them apart from other capabilities, such as operational and ordinary capabilities. Operational capabilities pertain to an organization's current operations, while ordinary capabilities encompass standard business practices adopted by most organizations. Dynamic capabilities are unique to each organization, originating from their established business models and the specialized resources they actively seek or already possess. Dynamic capabilities are part of an approach to business organizational analysis called organizational theory (Hutchinson, 2023). Dynamic capabilities are based on the core idea that organizations need to focus

on developing knowledge to have a competitive edge. This means that dynamically capable organizations will need to create an environment where employees can build and share ideas, foster innovative solutions, and continuously redefine strategies. They must be open to new technologies and development so they can keep up with changes in the marketplace. There is a positive correlation between the ratio of market efficiency and growth in selected economies (Svetlana et al., 2021).

Operational Capability

Operational capability, as envisaged within the framework of organizational capabilities theory, constitutes a fundamental pillar for an organization's strategic success. Silva et al. (2021) stated operational practices lie at the root of capabilities, implementing practices between firms provides a way of eliciting a firm's tacit knowledge embedded in its existing routines. It encompasses the organization's proficiency in efficiently coordinating and executing its internal processes, resources, and systems to effectively deliver products or services aligned with its strategic objectives. The theory posits that an organization's unique operational capabilities, deeply intertwined with its core competencies and internal resources, play a pivotal role in shaping its competitive advantage. Operational capability bridges the gap between strategic intent and practical implementation, acting as the conduit through which an organization's strategic aspirations are translated into tangible outcomes. By leveraging its operational capabilities, an organization not only ensures the smooth functioning of its day-to-day operations but also enhances its capacity to respond adeptly to market fluctuations and evolving customer demands. In this context, operational capability

serves as a critical enabler of an organization's ability to achieve sustained performance and differentiation in a dynamic business landscape.

External Stakeholder Relations

External stakeholder capabilities, such as customers or suppliers, connect and interact with the external environment. Fobbe and Hilletofth (2021) argued that stakeholder interaction is increasingly recognized as an essential component of sustainable business models, playing an important role for sustainable value propositions, creation and capture. This type of capability is significant for organizations constantly looking for ways to engage further with their surrounding networks while ensuring adequate customer satisfaction. By doing so, organizations can gain competitive advantages in their respective industries, ultimately driving more business growth. Kujala et al. (2022) stated stakeholder engagement has grown into a widely used yet often unclear construct in business and society research. Rhodes et al. (2014) stated that key internal factors such as human capital/talent, technology, culture, leadership, and processes such as collaboration, knowledge sharing, and co-creation of value with stakeholders and that these internal factors and processes must be integrated and aligned with external factors such as social, political, cultural, and environment to achieve effective stakeholder engagement.

Strategic Management Capabilities

Teece et al. (2003) stated the term “capabilities” emphasizes the key role of strategic management in appropriately adapting, integrating, and reconfiguring internal and external organizational skills, resources, and functional competences to match the requirements of a changing environment. Strategic management within the context of

organizational capabilities theory operates as the orchestrator of an organization's competitive advantage by leveraging its unique internal resources, routines, and core competencies. That an organization's distinct capabilities, often deeply embedded in its culture and processes, play a pivotal role in shaping its strategic direction. Strategic management in this framework involves the identification, development, and alignment of these capabilities with the external market environment. The theory emphasizes that sustained competitive advantage arises from the alignment of an organization's internal capabilities with its strategic goals, enabling the creation of value that is difficult for competitors to replicate. Effective strategic management within the lens of organizational capabilities theory entails continuous assessment of the organization's strengths and weaknesses, calibration of resource allocation, and adaptation of strategies to capitalize on its unique strengths while addressing market challenges.

Public Relations Theory

The foundational theories behind public relations theory encompass communication, psychology, sociology, and marketing (Brunner, 2019). This theory suggests that organizations should strive to build relationships with their target audiences, while also listening to what audiences have to say. By mastering the intricacies of public relations theory, organizations can gain the ability to develop and implement effective strategies for engaging with their target audiences and shaping public opinion. Organizations can then use this information to adjust their strategies as public relations continue to play a vital role within organizations such as crisis management, corporate social responsibility, promotional campaigns, and brand building. Organizations must also ensure that their public relations efforts adhere to the principles of ethical

communication. This includes communicating honestly and accurately, refraining from deception or manipulation, honoring commitments, and acting with respect toward stakeholders.

Mundy (2021) believed that the premise continues the trajectory or evolution of public relations theory, which arguably has moved from the organization-centric models of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, to a more-recent common discourse around organization-public relationships. Public relations theory has also evolved because of digital technologies and social media platforms. Organizations must now pay more attention to the conversations and interactions that take place in these digital spaces, as it can directly affect public image. Organizations must also be proactive in monitoring conversations about their brands, actively engaging with key stakeholders on social media, and learning from their target audiences' feedback.

Communication Within Public Relations Theory

Wang et al. (2021) stated internal communication plays a dominant role in modern organizations. Innovative communication techniques are essential for a successful public relations strategy, including how a company communicates its products, brand, or services to the public. Companies across all industries are increasingly using creative ways like podcasts, infographics, and 360-degree videos to make their messages more engaging and memorable. However, to be successful, Seidenglanz argues, the newsroom needs to have the benefit of a PR unit with high authority and access, that doesn't focus solely on internal or external stakeholder communication but rather focuses on both operating within clear rules and procedures (Adi & Stoeckle, 2021). Additionally, companies should also consider implementing interactive strategies such as

live streaming or virtual events to reach target audiences in a more immersive manner. The most important communication is internal communication with companies. Sinitsyna et al. (2024) argued internal communication has an impact on employee loyalty.

Gone are the days of relying solely on traditional communication tools to reach stakeholders. With the rise of Facebook, Twitter and other social platforms, companies now have a new arsenal of digital channels to connect with customers. Not only are these platforms more cost-effective, but they also offer unparalleled opportunities for engagement. However, navigating this landscape requires companies to stay informed on all available communication platforms and choose the right one for each situation. In a fast-paced world, the key to success lies in conveying messages timely and effectively.

Psychology Within Public Relations Theory

Psychology within public relations theory focuses on the concept of audience perception, which is how a particular brand or message is received by the target market. Audience perception studies focus on understanding how people interact with brands, what kind of emotions they evoke, and which aspects of a brand are more important to consumers than others. Public relations offer mobility and life to the attributes and promise of a brand, by creating believable situations and providing support for the honesty of the imagery behind a branding campaign. These actions are more important as they are perceived by the ever-changing, evolving media and business environments (Briciu & Briciu, 2021). In consumer psychology, which is a dominant paradigm in the marketing process, brands are understood as devices that simplify consumer decision making and lower search (Briciu & Briciu, 2020).

Sociology Within Public Relations Theory

Sociology within public relations looks at the effects of social structures (such as family, government, economics, and religion) on communication. Briciu and Briciu (2020) stated within the sociological approach, there is a certain paradigmatic position, as part of the interdisciplinary social theory of neo-Marxism, a school of thought that expresses a moderate position, with socio-economic influences, between the cultural approach and the theory of iconic brands. Further, Buraway (2004) believed a defining feature of public sociology is that it engages publics beyond the academy in dialogue about matters of political and moral concern. It also studies how communication is used to influence social change and informs people about issues related to culture, technology, education, and health care. This type of research can help organizations better understand their own target audience by looking at the different types of communication they use and how people respond. Understanding the relationship between communication, culture, and behavior is important for developing more effective public relations campaigns that reach their desired audience in a meaningful way.

Marketing Within Public Relations Theory

Marketing is at the center of public relations and communication strategy. Marketing has evolved a great deal from brands and companies forcing information on consumers with the sole intent of selling to now creating experiential contexts that offer consumers diverse gains and gratifications (Dahlen, 2021). What began as a basic need to connect people and ideas has evolved into an indispensable tool for transforming reputations, building relationships, and achieving success. Public relations is considered a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests

between organizations and their publics based on delivering information through trusted and ethical communication methods (IPRA, 2019). Public Relations and Communications Association stated that PR is a planned, sustained, and evaluated process that uses two-way communication techniques to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its public (PRCA, 2021). Public relations Society of America stated public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (PRSA, 2021).

Public relations is not just about generating buzz for a business. It is a multifaceted approach that involves building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders. This is where business capabilities theory comes into play. The theory focuses on developing and leveraging a business's capabilities to gain a competitive advantage. When applied to public relations, it becomes clear that a company's ability to communicate effectively with its stakeholders is crucial. By building strong and positive relationships with customers, investors, employees, and other stakeholders, a business can create a solid foundation for success. In this way, public relations becomes an integral part of business capabilities theory, highlighting the importance of effective communication and relationship-building in achieving business goals.

As technology advances, so will public relations. The power of a company's message is amplified by advancements in digital marketing and social media, allowing it to reach audiences faster and more efficiently than ever before. As this mode of communication becomes more common, organizations must stay ahead of the curve by maximizing the full potential of these platforms while remaining mindful of how they can

be used to their advantage. Companies can cultivate relationships with customers and stakeholders by understanding all aspects of public relations, from traditional methods such as press releases and media pitches to modern tactics such as influencer marketing.

The future of public relations is bright, employing innovative approaches to public relations can pave the way for success in today's competitive marketplace, and it is up to organizations to capitalize on the opportunities. Ada and Stoeckle (2021) looked at the future of public relations and communications from multiple perspectives: paradigmatic and theoretical, organizational, competencies vs. capabilities, and educational. Companies can ensure that their message reaches audiences worldwide by staying informed and embracing innovative tactics. Public relations strategies can be a powerful force for good in an organization with little imagination.

Key Themes Within Organizational Capabilities

Organization Within an Organization

Organizations within an organization are thought of as a team, where each has different strengths and weaknesses. These strengths and weaknesses need to be understood by the other members of the organization for everyone to work together effectively. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) found through research that various strategies are adopted based on an organization's needs and their continual measurement of success or failure. Strategies such as online team-building exercises, virtual training and development, online games, and competitions were several methods organizations found to maintain employee engagement with a remote workforce. The result in adopting these new methods was an employee workforce that felt engaged and motivated. Employees exhibiting these positive feelings were less likely to leave their organization. This type of

understanding can be fostered by building strong team dynamics and enhancing organizational success through effective communication and collaboration. By actively working together on projects and tasks, team members can gain a deeper understanding of each other's working styles, preferences, and expertise. Dyer et al. (2020) argued strategy, when implemented, allows an organization to strategically plan, implement, and prepare for future outcomes or forecasts in support of the product(s) or service(s) they delivered to their target consumer. Just like the organization capabilities theory suggests, employee capabilities are crucial for achieving long-term success for any organization.

Public Relations in Organizations

What began as a basic need to connect people and ideas has evolved into an indispensable tool for transforming reputations, building relationships, and achieving organizational success. Public relations is considered a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organizations and their publics based on delivering information through trusted and ethical communication methods (IPRA, 2019). Public Relations and Communications Association stated that PR is a planned, sustained, and evaluated process that uses two-way communication techniques to build mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its public (PRCA, 2021). Public relations Society of America stated public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics (PRSA, 2021).

Public relations is not just about generating buzz for a business. It is a multifaceted approach that involves building and maintaining relationships with various stakeholders. Polić and Salopek (2020) stated that using public relations as a critical

strategy can reach stakeholders, establish sustainable relationships, build public trust, and attract attention. The importance of public relations in organizations is given minimal attention, while other organizations understand the viability of using public relations (Polić & Salopek, 2020).

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up to organizations to capitalize on the opportunities. Ada and Stoeckle (2021) looked at the future of public relations and communications from multiple perspectives: paradigmatic and theoretical, organizational, competencies vs. capabilities, and educational. Companies can ensure that their message reaches audiences worldwide by staying informed and embracing innovative tactics. Public relations strategies can be a powerful force for good in an organization with little imagination. Meyer (2021) stated that, rather than developing even more complex approaches, public relations practitioners should adopt a metamodern perspective and creatively utilize the existing paradigms' relevant elements.

During the pandemic, the need for communication services increased (Report Linker, 2021). Small businesses must remain relevant, primarily through turbulent times; public relations is a tool that could afford them to do that. Public relations is earned media, which cuts the costs associated with advertising and marketing. This slight shift in a small business owner's business model can save them a lot of money and keep future costs down.

Effective public relations can make or break a company's reputation, impacting its success and longevity. A strategic communications strategy is required to cultivate strong relationships with customers, media outlets, and other stakeholders and craft compelling stories that maximize visibility among key audiences. Public relations assessment indicators include mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment (Loan, 2021).

Public relations can have many challenges in a business with respect to society (loss of trust, polarization), organizational terms (increased demands on legitimacy and responsibility), and in terms of communication (speed of communication processes,

increased number of communication and communicators) (Seidenglanz, 2021). An organization can face various public relations challenges: the crisis of trust, digitalization, acceleration, and loss of control (Adi, 2019; Seidenglanz, 2019b). Seidenglanz (2021) stated that public relations must be faster, more flexible, consistent, and transparent.

Business Sustainability Through Public Relations

Business sustainability is an increasingly important factor in organizations' public relations strategies. Industries and stakeholders often set sustainability requirements, forcing companies to seek internal and external solutions that limit environmental damage and promote economic success. Studies have found that these measures improved the reputation of businesses amongst their customers and counterparties while demonstrating a greater public interest in activity related to sustainable development. This has driven more corporations to increase their investments in public relations efforts with sustainability at its core, ultimately broadening the impact of effective communications networks on business growth.

Small businesses comprised 48% of private-sector jobs and accounted for 50% of the United States GDP contributing to the nation’s economic growth and development in 2016 (Small Business Administration, 2017a). Business sustainability must be used interchangeably with other dependent constructs, such as public relations. Mio et al. (2022) stated the path towards corporate sustainability involves creating environmental, social and economic value over the long term through sustainability-oriented strategies, business models, investments and management tools. Gatto (2020) believed that both public and private sector sustainability is accompanied by a few factors 1) new

measurements, 2) theories of human sustainability, and 3) local development and corporate sustainability theories.

As the world becomes increasingly cognizant of global challenges, businesses must commit to environmental sustainability through prudent public relations. By leveraging corporate communication and outreach initiatives in their strategies, firms can support sustainable growth that benefits all stakeholders while safeguarding the environment for generations to come. In this way, thorough PR helps create a positive association between companies' interests and those of society: by understanding its direct responsibility for action taken on behalf of humanity as well as shareholders alike, corporations are better prepared than ever before when making decisions aimed at creating lasting change in every economy worldwide.

The Future of Public Relations

The future of public relations is inextricably linked to business sustainability. Companies have become increasingly aware of their decisions and operations' environmental and social impact, leading to greater diligence in sustainability practices. Public relations require companies to have greater transparency and proactive communication with the public. Seidenglanz (2021) stated public relations faces many challenges in respect to society (loss of trust, polarization), organizational terms (increased demands on legitimacy and responsibility) and in terms of communication (speed of communication processes, increased number of communication and communicators). As a result, communication must be faster, more flexible, more consistent and more transparent. As such, public relations practitioners are responsible for staying abreast of these developments to communicate their organization's initiatives

effectively to different stakeholders while helping companies achieve long-term sustainable goals. Reeves's (2013) findings include public relations is the responsibility to spread and embed the culture of sustainability throughout its corporation, and it is clear that the future of public relations is embedded within the framework of a sustainable business environment.

Financing Public Relations Departments

In 2022, an article by Scott Oeth stated that investments are strong, but uncertainty remains. To maintain a competitive edge, public relations departments, like other departments within organizations, must ensure that they have the resources necessary to successfully push an organization's products or services to the forefront. In order to secure funding for public relations departments, it is important for public relations marketers within the organization to communicate the value and impact of their work effectively. This includes showcasing the return on investment of public relations efforts and how they contribute to overall organizational goals. One way to demonstrate this is through metrics such as media impressions, website traffic, brand sentiment, and social media engagement.

Unveiling the Talent and Customer Connections of Organizational Capabilities

Employee and Consumer Engagement

At the core of organizational capabilities lies the talent within the organization, characterized by their aptitude to connect with and comprehend the customers' needs, propelling everything from innovation to growth. Research has shown that customer relationships lead to higher performance levels in business markets compared to consumer markets (Palmatier et al., 2005). Ajiboye (2021) argued that consumer

engagement behavior is the manifestation that have a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers. Technology and innovation work in parallel, but as long as businesses create loyalty with their customers/stakeholders, they can create longevity and possibly competitive advantage. Consequently, fostering employee engagement should be a paramount focus for organizations, as it has been proven to enhance the quality of customer service and products (Kumar & Pansari, 2016). The research conducted by Kumar and Pansari (2016) demonstrated how crucial it is for organizations, particularly in the context of trends and innovations like social media, where news, whether positive or negative, can spread rapidly, to continuously support and enhance employee engagement to drive business success. These favorable attributes can significantly impact businesses when employees are fully engaged.

Kumar and Pansari (2016) asserted that competition nowadays is fierce, fueled by rapid technological advancements and the growing influence of social media as a unified marketplace. Lim et al. (2022) described how customer engagement is touted as a marketing imperative of the 21st century due to its promise for developing, maintaining, and growing customer satisfaction and business profitability. Both perspectives support the notion that establishing a customer connection relies on people buying into the people behind the brand, as well as the products and services that they can relate to or perceive as part of their lives. Goedhart and Koller (2020) also argued for today's value-minded executives, creating value cannot be limited to simply maximizing today's share price. Rather, the evidence points to a better objective: maximizing a company's value to its shareholders, now and in the future. Hence, businesses must prioritize the engagement of both customers and employees.

In today's business landscape, possessing an exceptional product or service is no longer sufficient. Building strong relationships and taking deliberate steps to establish connections are equally crucial. However, new technologies have increasingly transformed B2B relationships and upended the way business partners interact (Gligor et al., 2021). Specifically, in the buyer-supplier relationship, the buyer strives to maintain a sustainable connection with due consideration. Regalado (2023) stated buyer-seller relationships play a pivotal role in relationship marketing, as their effective management can yield significant benefits for companies.

Consumer Behavior Post COVID-19 Pandemic

An in-depth understanding of consumer behavior is the key to a successful marketing strategy both domestically and internationally (Nguyen et al., 2020). There was an intricate relationship between consumer decision-making and in-store behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Çakirkay et al. (2021) analyzed the data of 469 online participants, they provide valuable insights into consumer decision-making styles. Traditional marketing methods have long dominated the field, yet Çakirkay et al. asserted that manufacturers are now embracing in-store marketing tools such as promotions, sample distribution, and in-store sweepstakes, alongside the more traditional approaches, to sway consumers' choices within the store. Hamilton et al. (2019) reviewed marketing, psychology, economics, and sociology research to construct an integrative framework outlining how different types of scarcity individually and jointly influence consumers at various stages of their decision journeys.

The COVID-19 outbreak has greatly impacted consumer decision-making and in-store behavior. The proliferation of new shopping tools has allowed consumers to access

product and price information conveniently, both in and outside of the store. This shift in consumer decision-making and behavior has prompted retailers to redefine their approach. Retailers are now revisiting their marketing mix elements, devising competitive pricing strategies, implementing innovative promotional techniques, and adopting a consumer-centric approach to the products they offer.

Parallel Trends in Organization Capabilities

Agility and Innovation

The changes in the business environment and the increase in competition have led organizations to focus greatly on improving their organizational performance in order to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage by relying on keeping pace with these changes and developing their innovation capability to meet their customers' desires (AlTaweel & Al-Hawary, 2021). The development of agility and innovation in organizational capabilities suggests the importance of creating an environment where diverse teams collaborate to promote agile methodologies and drive innovation. This approach underscores the significance of maintaining a balance between operational efficiency and innovation within organizations. The innovation of products, services, and business models is key to firm survival, performance, and growth in today's turbulent business environments (Brand et al., 2021). Bedford et al. (2021) argued that innovation is related to the availability of a set of innovative capabilities and the desire of individuals or organizations to translate creative theoretical ideas into practice. This dynamic approach is crucial in today's rapidly evolving business landscape as it enables organizations to adapt swiftly and effectively to changes, ensuring long-term growth and competitiveness.

Agility and innovation play a crucial role in marketing research, especially in today's evolving landscape. Obtaining and implementing agile organizational capabilities enable firms to build higher value within the business ecosystem (Shams et al., 2021). Marketing helps deliver compelling, creative, and dynamic industry-leading campaigns to a targeted audience while helping to create memorable experiences. Schöck et al. (2023) argued that competitors can threaten the market position of companies with disruptive innovations, intensifies the need for innovations, in order to sustainably remain on the market as a company and in the long term. Marketing can initiate behavioral change within a targeted consumer market by understanding consumers' demand, pain points, and current market trends. However, with the changing marketing landscape, it is vital to develop and present new strategies for marketing in a digital environment. Kapoor and Kapoor (2021) emphasized that digitalization in marketing offers various advantages compared to traditional methods.

Internet, social media, mobile apps, and other digital communication technologies have become integral parts of billions of people's everyday lives. According to recent statistics (Statista, 2020a), there are 4.54 billion active Internet users globally, accounting for 59% of the global population. Stephen (2016) highlighted that people spend a significant amount of time online, searching for information, sharing experiences with other consumers, and engaging with companies. Organizations have responded to this change in consumer behavior by incorporating digital and social media into their marketing strategies (Stephen, 2016). While traditional marketing methods are not obsolete, it is undeniable that the digital age has brought about new challenges and opportunities. The significance of agility in driving innovation within the field of

marketing research remains crucial. Organizations must allocate resources for continuous marketing research to enhance their organizational capabilities.

Conclusion

Small businesses play a vital role in the economy, contributing to job creation, innovation, and the provision of goods and services to local communities. Small businesses typically make up the majority of firms within most economies (Mazzarol, 2020). However, these businesses often face challenges when competing against larger corporations due to limited resources in terms of personnel and capital. As a result, there is a branding gap between small businesses and larger corporations, leading to economic instability for small business owners. To address this issue, one proposed solution is the implementation of public relations departments within small businesses. Public relations involves managing communication between organizations and their stakeholders, including customers, employees, investors, and the general public. It plays a critical role in building brand awareness and maintaining a positive reputation for companies. This study aims to explore the potential benefits of public relations for small businesses and provide strategies for implementing effective public relations practices with limited resources.

Public relations offer numerous advantages to small businesses, including increased brand awareness, improved reputation management, and enhanced customer relationships. These benefits, in turn, can lead to increased sales and revenue. A major advantage of public relations is its ability to level the playing field between small businesses and larger corporations. Through strategic communication tactics such as media outreach, social media engagement, and community involvement, small businesses

can gain exposure and build a positive image without having to match the marketing budgets of their larger competitors. This provides small businesses with an opportunity to compete on a more equal footing in the market.

Overall, the implementation of public relations practices can significantly benefit small businesses by addressing the branding gap and helping them establish a strong presence in the market. Further research is necessary to delve into the specific advantages of public relations for small businesses and provide more comprehensive strategies for successful implementation.

Transition

Section 1 gave an overview of the study's foundation, the background problem, purpose, nature, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. Section 1 thoroughly expounded upon the significance of the study and its literature review. These foundational aspects are of utmost importance in effectively conveying the research's most important aspects. With these components, attention now shifts toward Section 2 and the researcher’s role in the subsequent segment of the study. This pivotal section encompasses vital information regarding data collection, encompassing key components such as the researcher's role, participant selection, research design, methodology, population sampling, reliability, adherence to ethical research guidelines, data analysis, and validity. Section 3 predominantly centers on the research methodology, providing an intricate analysis of the information that I acquired, acting as a guiding framework in fulfilling each objective outlined in Section 1 of this study.

Section 2: The Project

The foundation of this study is built upon a thorough examination of scholarly and professional literature. The literature review is a crucial component of the entire study, and this section introduces the researcher's role, which includes designing the research, selecting participants, and collecting data. This section provides information on the participating population. Selecting appropriate participants was essential to ensure the collected data was relevant and valid. Lastly, this section will outline the strategies and techniques used to collect data and elaborate on the research design method.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore how small business owners who lack public relations strategies compete against larger corporations that have greater resources and contacts for obtaining financing to fund public relations departments and cannot remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers. The implication for social change is that with economic sustainability improved through public relations, small and medium-sized enterprises can create additional jobs that provide economic growth and employment and generate taxes for the communities in which they operate. additional jobs that provide economic growth and employment and generate taxes for the communities in which they operate.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role entails more than just conducting experiments or collating data. A researcher is an explorer, delving into uncharted territories of knowledge, and a storyteller, translating complex data into understandable narratives that inform and enlighten. A research work serves as a pillar on which new theories are built and existing

ones are refined or challenged. They engage in critical thinking, careful analysis, and innovative problem-solving, continually pushing the boundaries of human understanding. A growing body of work touts the importance of researchers writing about their subjectivities in order to unearth underlying tensions and truths in conducting research (Saldaña, 2013). In conducting this research, I rigorously followed the esteemed ethical standards and principles as outlined in the seminal work by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, known as The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. The Belmont Report outlines three core ethical principles essential to protecting human subjects in research: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. These principles serve as a framework for evaluating the ethical considerations of my research participants. Compliance with US federal regulations regarding the protection of human subjects in research is mandatory and public universities must have an internal review board (IRB), which reviews research involving human subjects (Brown et al., 2020).

Several limitations and challenges may arise, potentially impeding the investigative process's integrity and conclusiveness of the research. One challenge I could face is not vetting the right participants to align with my research questions. Other limitations could be time constraints with participants during the research. The participants' assumptions during the research can become an issue if they come with their own biases. My own bias may have been a limitation, since the research was focused on the industry I currently work in.

I addressed each challenge with ethical scrutiny and strategic planning in light of these considerations. Addressing these hurdles is paramount in augmenting my scholarly work's reliability and validity. Among the most significant of these challenges is my own proximity to the subject matter, which, while offering depth and insight, may also introduce bias and subjectivity. In my specific context, my extensive background in communication and public relations, spanning over a decade, positions me in unique standing in relation to the research area. This intimate familiarity with the field undeniably offers a nuanced understanding and practical insights. However, it simultaneously necessitates a heightened awareness and strategies to mitigate potential biases to preserve the objectivity and integrity of the research outcomes.

When undertaking research involving human participants, it is imperative to balance the ethical considerations to ensure the integrity of this study. This involved a comprehensive approach to minimizing potential harms and risks associated with the research while maximizing the potential benefits. Ethical principles demand unwavering respect for human dignity, privacy, and autonomy, affirming the participants' rights and freedoms throughout the research process. Special attention and care must be afforded to vulnerable populations to safeguard their rights and well-being, ensuring they are not subjected to undue risk or exploitation. This ethical posture underscores the necessity of adopting measures that protect these groups while engaging in research endeavors.

In executing this study, I engaged in direct, in-person interactions with various participants, adopting an approach rooted in collaboration and open dialogue. I recognized the importance of maintaining clear and professional boundaries and respect when interacting with participants. This ensured that my interactions focused solely on

gathering accurate and unbiased data rather than being influenced by personal relationships or biases. Reflexive writing fosters the evaluation of assumptions, implicit bias, and theoretical connections; it is essential for examining power imbalances because it opens a space in which multiple narratives and perspectives can overlap and coexist (Lesley et al., 2023). I obtained informed consent from participants before the study to ensure they were fully aware of the purpose and potential risks involved. During my interactions with participants, I actively listened and asked open-ended questions to encourage them to share their thoughts and experiences openly. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of their perspectives and insights. I took detailed notes during these interactions and transcribed them for later analysis.

Participants

To ensure the integrity of doctoral research, it is vital to address eligibility requirements and protect against potential threats. According to Saunders et al. (2018), one significant threat comes from the research participants, including availability, incorrect responses, intentional sabotage, and biases. Achieving reliable and valid results is crucial for presenting top-notch doctoral research (Fusha & Ness, 2015). It is important to carefully consider the research participants and how they may impact the accuracy of their results. There are several steps that researchers can take to mitigate potential threats from participants. Firstly, eligibility requirements should be established and adhered to. This ensures that the sample selected accurately reflects the studied population and minimizes potential biases. Researchers should also take steps to ensure that the participants are providing accurate and truthful responses. This can be achieved by implementing anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent measures.

I recruited participants from various networks, all of whom are part of direct networks I am actively involved in through various organizations. These networks include esteemed organizations such as the Goldman Sachs 10K Small Business Program and The Chambers of Commerce for New York and New Jersey. This eclectic group comprises SMEs from various industries, including technology, beauty, nonprofit, and manufacturing, to offer diverse insights and experiences. To ensure the integrity and relevance of my research participants, I implemented a vetting process. This entailed distributing a comprehensive qualifying form designed to assess each candidate's suitability. The criteria focused on various pertinent aspects, including their business acumen, years in business, and willingness to participate voluntarily in meaningful research contributions. According to Marks et al. (2017), it is important to take time to plan recruitment, including an in-depth understanding of potential participants and recruitment tools. Following the successful vetting stage, I extended a formal invitation to the qualified candidates via email. This contained a link to an electronic consent form detailing the requirements and expectations associated with their participation. To proceed, participants were required to review and agree to conditions such as availability for research activities, the extent of their participation, and other relevant factors that underscore the ethical framework guiding this study, allowing for a methodical, respectful approach and commitment to ethical research practices and ensuring that my findings are grounded in the informed and voluntary participation of a well-curated group of SMEs leaders.

Research Method and Design

The research method and design provide a roadmap to understanding the intricate relationship between the methodology and the research question. As such, an exemplary introduction should succinctly present the core focus while offering insight into the chosen methodology that guides the study. According to Snyder (2019), there are a number of existing guidelines for literature reviews. Depending on the methodology needed to achieve the purpose of the review, all types can be helpful and appropriate to reach a specific goal. These approaches can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed, depending on the phase of the review (Snyder, 2019). I wanted to explore more in-depth approaches and strategies small business owners use to remain competitive and profitable by financing public relations or public relations departments. Also, the data collection process will stay the same because I am using a qualitative approach to my research. In principle, data collection is an activity that uses established methods and tools for validity and correctness (Middelton, 2023).

Research Method

Qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in the same study. Mixed methods offer an excellent approach to synthesizing qualitative and quantitative evidence to generate more robust implications for practice, research, and policymaking (Younas et al., 2021). Chigbu (2019) believed it is crucial to have knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative research, and Misral et al. (2021) agreed, as both types of research involve writing research questions and hypotheses. Using multiple research methods provides a more comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, allowing for triangulation and validation of findings. This is especially useful in social science research, where

human behavior and interactions can be difficult to measure and understand using a single method.

A quantitative method examines the relationship between variables and measures them numerically (Saunders et al., 2018). I used several research approaches to collect more than numerical data, making quantitative not the best method for this research study. A qualitative research design uses various data collection techniques and procedures to develop the arch framework and theoretical contribution (Saunder et al., 2015). Epp and Otnes (2021) stated qualitative research addresses important problems or gaps; motivates the pursuit of innovative, implementable, and strategic solutions to thorny theoretical and managerial problems; and specifies the stakeholders for whom the research is most salient. Quantitative research can be employed to describe the characteristics of a population or phenomenon but also to examine associations between an exposure and outcome or relationships between variables (Rodda et al., 2024). My research study was not about the relationship between variables; therefore, a quantitative design would not work for my doctoral study.

Research Design

Qualitative research is a type of research that involves specific analyses developed according to different designs, and it involves various strategies and procedures. It is a method of inquiry that focuses on understanding people's subjective experiences, perspectives, and behaviors. Qualitative research is often used to explore complex social phenomena that cannot be easily quantified, such as emotions, attitudes, and beliefs. Researchers use a variety of techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, and observation, to collect data that can be analyzed in a systematic and rigorous manner.

Overall, qualitative research provides valuable insights into the social world and can help inform policy and practice decisions. Qualitative research refers to specific analyses developed according to different designs and involves various strategies and procedures. I consider the following research designs: grounded theory, case study and culture analysis.

Phenomenology is a type of research that focuses on phenomena that individuals are aware of in their daily lives but do not have detailed information about (Turhan, 2019). Ethnography this design is used to define human behaviors and cultural and symbolic dimensions of these behaviors (Turhan, 2019). Grounded theory is a systematic method of conducting research that shapes collecting data and provides explicit strategies for analyzing them (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020).

The case study design aims to examine real-life actual research problems and phenomena in detail and includes the following phases according to Turhan (2019) writing research questions; writing sub goals; choosing analysis unit(s); explaining the focused issue; choosing the participants; collecting data and finding connections between data and sub goals, analyzing and interpreting collected data and reporting, which made this the perfect design for my study and how I ensured data saturation.

Population and Sampling

The population of this case study for my research will be data collected from founder and chief executive officers (CEOs) of SMEs that have public relations departments or public relations representation from an agency or consultant. The six business owners will be chosen based on their willingness to participate in the study. The selection of SMEs for this research is crucial as it directly impacts the reliability and

validity of the findings. The six SMEs in this study, located in the Northeast region, offer a diverse business landscape and entrepreneurial culture. With a high concentration of small businesses, this region serves as an ideal sample for research, meeting the criteria for the case study scope: a) a founder or CEO; b) a decision-maker with hands-on knowledge of operations, PR strategies, and practices; and c) available for the one-on-one interviews. When reaching my research participants, I conducted interviews in person and via videoconferencing, depending on their location and availability. The semi-structured interviews help provide a framework for discussion. This allows for the consistent impact of having a dedicated PR department on business success and reputation management. Understanding the differences in strategies and practices between these businesses can provide valuable insights for other SMEs looking to enhance their public relations efforts. The selection of participants based on their willingness to participate in the study ensures they are motivated and enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and perspectives. This led to more thorough and detailed responses, providing a deeper understanding of the role of public relations in SMEs.

I employed convenience sampling for this study, where participants will be chosen based on their accessibility and availability to my research. Convenience sampling collects data from whoever is willing to partake in a study, is the most approachable, or is, in other ways, conveniently accessible to the researcher (Wienclaw, 2019). Convenience sampling is a popular research method, especially when time and resources are limited. However, it is important to note that convenience sampling can result in biased results as the sample may not accurately represent the larger population. Therefore, it was important to make sure findings of this study were interpreted with

caution, and my research included analyzing secondary data from industry reports, articles, and case studies on public relations in SMEs, helping validate and provide further context for my primary research findings.

Ethical Research

When undertaking research that involves people, it is of paramount importance that we respect and fiercely guard the ethical treatment of all participants. Every scientific research conducted with human beings must have a clear and relevant justification, participants must be freely and adequately informed about the research, including its risks, benefits, and consequences, and their agreement to participate must be given without them being coerced or convinced (Taquette et al., 2022). In my capacity as a researcher, I shoulder the responsibility of implementing comprehensive protocols to secure the dignity, rights, and welfare of the individuals who take part in this study. I achieved this by making sure I had each participant's consent which will be capture electronically through an informed consent form. Research involving human subjects is required to observe universal principles of ethical consideration (The Belmont Report, 2016). Bitter et al. (2020) believed western scholars agree on the main principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice for clinical ethics, with some adjustments in how these principles are applied in the research setting.

My dedication to transparency and participant autonomy ensured that participants had access to the informed consent form at all times. Each participant could withdraw from the study by accepting or declining their interview appointment through an electronic calendar invite (see Appendix A). No incentives were provided for participating in this study. These protocols are not just formalities but a mutual agreement

of trust and ethical protection between me as the researcher and the participants, ensuring their consent is based on a full understanding of each person's involvement in the study. Throughout the study, participants' rights and well-being were also a top priority. Any potential risks or discomforts associated with participation were thoroughly explained, and measures were taken to minimize as much risk as possible. Moreover, participants were guaranteed confidentiality regarding their personal information and responses ensuring the exclusion of names and any other personally identifying details of individuals or organizations. All data collected will be kept strictly confidential and stored securely in password-protected files, and I will share a full summary of the research findings upon publication. Walden University's ethics approval for this study, number 10-22-24-1061551.

Data Collection Instruments

Salmia (2023) argued that the validity of the data obtained is largely determined by the qualitative or validity of the instruments used, in addition to the data collection methods used. Data collection instruments can also be broadly classified into two categories: primary and secondary. Examples of primary data collection instruments include surveys, interviews, questionnaires, observation forms, focus groups, and experiments and examples of secondary data collection instruments include books, journals, government reports, and statistical databases.

I serve as the primary data collection instrument in this study. As the researcher, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with Founders and CEOs from six SMEs from various industries. The semi-structured interview consists of several key questions that help to define the areas that are being explored in the research. The semi-structured

interview consists of several key questions that help to define the areas that are being explored in the research (Alamri, 2019). These interviews allowed me to gain personal insights and perspectives directly from the participants, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences and decision-making processes when exploring or implementing strategies to finance their public relations departments to improve or remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers public relations departments.

To enhance the reliability and validity of the study, I asked open-ended questions during each interview, allowing for a more comprehensive and detailed exploration of the subject matter. I observed each participant during these interviews, as observation is important when conducting these interviews to engage and get a real feeling of participants being open and honest and listening for any imposing biases. Krismony et al. (2020) stated that in participant observation, the investigator observes what people do, hear what they say, and takes part in their activities. I video recorded each interview on Zoom, a secured video platform that only the participants and I could access through a special assigned meeting link. I later transcribed each video recording verbatim to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the data collected.

To verify the credibility of the results, I conducted member checking, also referred to as participant or respondent validation, a method for assessing the trustworthiness of findings. In this process, I shared the transcripts with participants and asked them to review them for accuracy and completeness, allowing for any discrepancies or misunderstandings to be addressed and corrected.

My secondary data collection instruments comprised of books, peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and statistical databases. These sources provided

background information on the topic as well as supporting evidence of findings. To ensure the reliability of these sources, I critically evaluated their credibility and relevance to my research question.

Data Collection Technique

In qualitative research, the richness and depth of understanding are important in selecting appropriate data collection techniques for success in gathering enough data to address the research question. To achieve primary data, different sources can be used such as experiments, surveys, interviews, and questionnaires (Taherdoost, 2021). Qualitative researchers are under increasing time demands to rapidly collect, analyze, and disseminate the results of their findings (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). This research study includes interviews that gather data from a sampling population of small business entrepreneurs and questionnaires to collect data. Salvador et al. (2020) argued that it is also possible to collect data in online discussion forums, sites in which a certain group, with common features, gathers to debate a certain theme. I employed semi-structured interviews as a primary method for gathering data in this research study. Semi-structured interviews offer a high level of flexibility, which allow me to explore my research topic while conversing with pre-determined questions that ensure consistency and relevance to the research subject. Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik (2021) argued that a primary benefit of the semi-structured interview is that it permits interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview. The collection technique encourages participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs in an open-ended manner, giving me the researcher more insight into the participants' actual experiences. McGrath et al. (2019)

stated semi structured interviews are the preferred data collection method when the researcher's goal is to better understand the participant's unique perspective rather than a generalized understanding of a phenomenon.

Before conducting interviews with participants, I first contacted each individual via email. This email had an enhanced feature that notified me when the recipient has received, opened, and interacted with the message. Within this email, participants will be prompted to access and review their consent forms for the research study. Once participants have reviewed and completed their consent forms, they will be asked to schedule an interview. This email feature not only ensures that participants are aware of the research study and their rights as participants, but it also allows me to track any potential issues with communication or scheduling.

After receiving their opt-in to participate in the research through the consent form, I scheduled each video interview individually. This scheduling process entailed scheduling through Google Meets and fortifying the sessions with a unique meeting link, accessible solely by myself and each participant. Watkins (2017) advised taking advantage of web-based meeting platforms such as Skype, Googleþ Hangout, and GoToMeeting to maximize the time away from one another. According to Ross et al. (2023), the amalgamation of smart technologies is breaking the boundaries between physical, digital, and biochemical disciplines including artificial intelligence (AI), mobile technologies, cloud computing, 3D-printing, and the Internet of Things (IoT), a network of interconnected devices with embedded sensors that communicate with each other via the Cloud.

To bolster confidentiality and provide an additional layer of security, I used the "waiting room" feature. This function served as a safeguard, ensuring that only the authorized participants can gain entry to the interview space at the appointed time, thereby upholding the integrity and privacy of my data collection process. Before initiating each interview, I sought verbal consent from each participant for video and audio recording, asking each if they were okay that the interview was being recorded, thereby adding an additional layer of ethical rigor to the process. After receiving their consent, I activated the transcription feature, a tool designed to complement my written notes and guarantee comprehensive data capture, ensuring no critical insights are overlooked. This approach not only streamlined the subsequent analysis but also reinforced the integrity of the research. I followed the established interview protocol outlined (see Appendix B) throughout the interview.

Each interview will be scheduled for 1 hour via Zoom and lasted 45-60 minutes. I asked each participant all 10 interview questions (see Appendix C) outlined in Section 1 of this study. I actively listened to the participants' responses during the interviews and took detailed notes. This allowed me to capture their words, tone, and body language, providing a more comprehensive understanding of their experiences. I made sure to create a comfortable and safe environment for the interviews that are conducted online through Zoom. This included providing privacy, ensuring confidentiality, and maintaining a respectful demeanor throughout the process.

Data Organization Technique

Attention to detail was paramount during the organization of research data in this study. After completing each interview, the transcript was sent to my direct email in a

Google Word format. I then opened the transcripts of each participant's response and saved them under the respondent's first and last name, interview date, and interview time. Then, I transferred the responses from the Google Word document into NVivo, allowing me to arrange each participant's response by coding and identifying themes. The use of NVivo could aid in the pragmatics of engaging in the "messy" and iterative process of realist sense making from multiple data sources, thereby enhancing rigour as an audit trail of the analytical process is documented, and transparency as no step in the process of analysis was lost to this documenting endeavor (Dalkin et al., 2021).

Multiple security measures were implemented to fortify the integrity of the research data. Each digital document received a layer of protection through password encryption. Additionally, physical copies are safeguarded in a tamper-resistant file cabinet located in my personal office, to which I solely possess the entry key. For added security, the duplicate key is stowed away in a highly secure location, accessible only by myself.

To maintain or quickly recover data accessibility, integrity, and availability during unexpected events or disasters, I executed a comprehensive backup strategy. The data were systematically duplicated onto a secure external hard drive (USB) and simultaneously preserved within a password-protected cloud storage service. This dual-storage approach is designed to prevent data loss in the face of potential adversities such as theft, natural disasters, or accidental damage to my office premises. Adhering to Walden University's prescribed guidelines, I will commit to maintaining the confidentiality and availability of the data for a minimum duration of 5 years, after which it will be disposed of in accordance with the recommended data destruction protocols.

This structured preservation plan underscores our unwavering dedication to research excellence and data stewardship.

Data Analysis

Bingham (2023) stated there are five phases of qualitative analysis: organizaing the data, sorting the data, understanding the data, interpreting the data and explaining the data. Making the unit of analysis is vital to show how the research question aligns with the research purpose and problem statement and if the population will prove or disprove the research questions through the collected data. After sampling this population, information is analyzed, and conclusions are drawn (Bougie and Sekaran, 2019). When a researcher fails to sample a population that can contribute to their research problem, the data could be inconclusive. Bougie and Sekaran (2019) stated a researcher could do more harm than good when data is not collected or analyzed correctly. When a researcher fails to collect data from the people, events, or objects that can provide the correct answers to solve the research problem, the research will be in vain (Bougie and Sekaran, 2019).

Mezmir (2020) stated collecting information, which researchers call data, is only the beginning of the research process. This study employs interviews for qualitative data collection method to gather in-depth opinions and experiences related to the subject matter. Also, hand coding, a traditional yet powerful method where researchers dissect text manually, identifying and labeling distinct segments of data. Transcriptions need to be very detailed to capture features of talk such as emphasis, speed, tone of voice, timing and pauses but these elements can be crucial for interpreting data (Roberts, 2007). The research thematic analysis was based on interview responses from participants in the research study. My first step involved becoming intimately familiar with the data. This

entails reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to immerse myself in the content. After systematically going through each transcript, I identified and highlighted sections of the text that relate to the research question. In this step, the goal was to generate initial codes from the data. Coding involves identifying specific data features that appear meaningful and relevant to the research question. I reviewed the codes and identified patterns, grouping similar codes together to form potential themes and creating a list of initial themes. After reviewing each theme to determine whether it accurately represents the coded data, I combined, refined, or discarded themes as necessary to ensure each theme is distinct and covers a significant aspect of the data. After reviewing the themes, I wrote detailed descriptions for each theme. I assigned clear, concise names to each theme and ensured the themes were linked back to the research question. The final step produced a detailed report that presents the thematic analysis in a coherent and logical manner. By taking Braun and Clarke's 6-step process, I look to uncover strategies and challenges SMEs face in financing their public relations departments. The themes identified through my findings should provide valuable insights into the resourcefulness and innovative approaches small business owners adopt to remain competitive and profitable in a market dominated by larger peers.

NVivo software will assist me with managing, analyzing, and visualizing qualitative data. This advanced tool supports deep-level data analysis, providing a means to organize and retrieve data for further interpretation efficiently. Implementing both hand coding and NVivo will enable a layered approach to data analysis. Hand coding will allow initial theme recognition, while NVivo will facilitate complex queries and broader theme relationships. The blend of these methods may lead to a robust interpretation of the

data in order to correlate the key themes of establishing a public relations department and assessing its necessity with recent studies.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Eligibility requirements are important to quality research, and many threats can affect quality data and harm the doctoral research study. Saunders et al. (2018) identified reliability threats with participant error and bias and researcher error and bias. These threats within the research include incorrect responses, the researchers' inability to be sensitive to their subject times, and a researcher putting their point of view within the study. Reliability and validity within doctoral research are important because the researcher wants to present quality research (Fusha & Ness, 2015). First, as a researcher, I needed complete understanding and access to my participants. Second, I had to think ahead for unforeseen events, so I would not be caught off guard if something arises within the research.

Validity

Validity is a determining aspect of research that assesses whether the methods and measurements accurately capture the concept they're designed to investigate. Validity resided amongst, and was the result and culmination of other empirical conceptions: universal laws, evidence, objectivity, truth, actuality, deduction, reason, fact and mathematical data to name just a few (Winter, 2003). Schweinsberg et al. (2023) stated current validity frameworks ignore the truthfulness of empirical inferences that are central to research-problem statements. Validity refers to the degree to which a study measures what it intends to measure. Validity is essential because if a study lacks

validity, then its results and conclusions may not be accurate or reliable. Threats of internal validity, such as confirmed participants exempting from the research study, and things outside of the researcher's control like unforeseen circumstances. Validity and reliability of research and its results are important elements to provide evidence of the quality of research in the organizational field (Hayashi et al., 2019).

Credibility

Stahl and King (2020) believed credibility asks the "How congruent are the findings with reality?" Credibility within a research study, particularly one focusing on the niche of public relations as an approach for SMEs to enhance business sustainability, hinges on methodologies that minimize bias and employ member checking. The principle of credibility in qualitative research concerns the extent to which the research findings and conclusions can be viewed to be believable (Nassaji, 2020). Davis (2020) argued that ensuring credibility means to develop a chain of logic between decisions and how a researcher will conduct a study. To ensure that the findings within this study are trustworthy and can be confidently applied in practice, I adopted techniques such as well-defined criteria for participant selection, deployment of consistent procedures across all data collection interactions, and triangulation of data sources to offset any skewed perspectives. The process of member checking, soliciting participants' insights to gauge the accuracy and reliability of the research interpretations, becomes an indispensable component in establishing the study's veracity. Editors, peer reviewers, Institutional Review Board (IRB), dissertation advisors, and research supervisors may assume that threats to validity are not adequately addressed unless member checking is included in the research design (Motulsky, 2021). This iterative feedback mechanism serves to fortify

this research's legitimacy and diversifies the perspectives within the study, ultimately leading to conclusions that more accurately mirror the operational realities of SMEs.

Transferability

Transferability pertains to the degree to which the research findings can be extrapolated to alternative contexts or situations (Kakar et al., 2023). Guda and Lincoln (1985) defined transferability when naturalistic generalization occurs when the findings are in harmony with the experiences of the individual evaluating the research and thus appear transferable in the eyes of the reader. Providing a detailed description of my data collection and analysis techniques in this study, I enabled others to replicate and validate my research findings. This is crucial for ensuring the transferability and generalizability of my results to other settings or populations. To mitigate the threat of transferability, I used a sample population of public relations departments with varying financial structures and operational models. I also use multiple data sources, including interviews, questionnaires, and surveys.

Confirmability

To ensure conformability within my research study, member checking, audit trails and a systematic record of all decisions will be made during the research to ensure trust worthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) regarded audit trails as one of the principal techniques for establishing the confirmability of qualitative findings. Detailed documentation included data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation. This process enriches the study's credibility and provides a transparent avenue for evaluating its accuracy and potential applicability, cementing the integrity of the findings as a true reflection of the participants' viewpoints, unmarred by my subjective influence. To

mitigate threats, I implemented triangulation and independent reviews to cross-check data and interpretations.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 centered around the role of the researcher, carefully crafting the research parameters to the strategic selection of participants, ensuring that the process remains coherent and the results, credible. It provided a comprehensive backdrop to the demographics and characteristics of the participants, which are paramount for a robust analysis. It expanded on the importance of selecting the right individuals to participate in the study, emphasizing that their input is foundational to achieving data saturation, a point at which no new information is expected to emerge, signifying that the data collected is sufficient and accurate to support the findings. Section 3 presents the core findings of this exhaustive research, as well as an outline of the study, including the driving purpose statement and the pivotal research questions that have shepherded this academic pursuit. It serves as the platform where the research materializes its purpose through a thorough presentation of findings that not only supports the study's conclusion but also lights the way for its practical application.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

Eggers (2020) stated that despite their significant contributions to the economy, SMEs exhibit heightened susceptibility to crises and market disruptions. This qualitative multiple case study aims to delve into the strategies employed by small business owners to navigate competitive landscapes dominated by larger corporations. To guarantee a thorough and insightful data collection process, each participant was asked an identical set of ten open-ended questions. I engaged seven participants who were either the founder or CEO of SMEs representing a diverse range of industries, including technology, beauty, nonprofit, real estate, and manufacturing. This diversity in industry representation was intended to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and insights into the varying competitive dynamics and public relations challenges SMEs face across different sectors. Simultaneously, follow-up questions were crafted to dig deeper for valuable insights from each experience. The interviews produced rich, detailed data, which was recorded for accuracy and transcribed to ensure accuracy. Here are the four major recurring themes from the data analysis: a) public relations impact on small businesses, b) pivoting and revenue diversification, c) public relations measurement strategies and value, and d) marketing strategies and promotional tools.

Presentation of the Findings

The research question guiding this study is: What strategies do SMEs use to finance their public relations departments to improve branding and to remain as competitive and profitable as their larger peers? To address this question, I employed a qualitative multiple case study approach, with a focus on achieving data saturation. It is

crucial to have knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative research (Chigbu, 2019). This approach included the following strategies: a) conducting semi-structured interviews with SME founders and CEOs b) adhering to participants' schedules to ensure flexibility and accessibility, and c) utilizing questionnaires and surveys to gain broader insights. This multi-pronged approach allowed me to systematically collect and analyze rich, detailed data to uncover practical strategies SMEs use to enhance financing for their public relations departments, enabling them to bridge the branding gap and sustain profitability.

Each of the seven participants was designated as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, or P7 to protect confidentiality. The collected data were organized and uploaded into NVivo software for coding and interpretation to ensure data accuracy through member checking, mitigate potential biases and produce the following themes:

Table 2

Emergent Themes

Themes	Number of respondents	Number of times the theme was addressed
Public relations strategies	7	9
Public relations budget	4	11
Promotional strategies	5	14
Public relations measurement	6	12

Theme 1: Public Relations Strategies

The first theme is the use of public relations strategies among the SMEs owners or CEOs in this study, emphasizing the integration of effective public relations approaches within their business models. Public relations strategies delved into the importance of public relations for SMEs, including the potential impact of public relations on business

success and sustainability. Some public relations strategies included using social media, particularly Instagram, for engagement, visibility, and cost-effectiveness. Relationship building was also a key factor, emphasizing client relationships, networking, and nurturing relationships with influential figures. Events and appearances, including conferences, screenings, and networking events, were also seen as important public relations tactics. Media placements and storytelling were highlighted as crucial for increasing visibility and impact from P1 and P3. Finally, thought leadership and organic marketing, such as workshops and facilitation, were also employed as effective public relations strategies.

P1 outlined their public relations approach, emphasizing the power of storytelling across various businesses and platforms. They strategically leverage multiple media channels, including social media, live interviews, public appearances, panel discussions, and news broadcasts. To illustrate their strategy, P1 shared examples such as collaborating with banks and securing features in both publications and internal communications. According to P1:

> I've found social media, particularly Instagram, to be very effective with our public relations strategies. Regularly checking and updating our Instagram presence, including posting articles and stories, has made a significant difference in our brands visibility and gaining new clients and leads.

P2 highlighted relationship building as a cornerstone of their public relations efforts. They underscored the importance of consistent client engagement by attending networking events that allow for meaningful one-on-one interactions. Success for P2 is measured through metrics such as the number of closings, client referrals, and return on

investment from public relations initiatives like newsletters. According to P2:

> The most important public relations strategy that I have implemented and consistent with my clients, is them hearing from me, seeing me, and remembering that I exist, this way if they are thinking about selling their home, or they know someone else that's selling their their home, they're going to reach out to me. Another public relations strategy that I use is social media. It has been proven that social media works very, very well for my business, whenever I use social media my visibility increases.

P3, a small business owner, acknowledged limited public relations efforts due to budget and time constraints. However, their strategies include participation in chamber of commerce events, sponsorships, charity work, and occasional press releases. P3 identified cross-branding opportunities, such as sponsoring events, and attending job fairs, as particularly effective for smaller businesses. P3 stated that "The best public relations strategies are the ones that bring me money, but I have found that working with other brands has been the most effective."

P4 emphasized social media, particularly Instagram, as a vital tool for increasing engagement and visibility. P4, noted that being active and maintaining a strong online presence directly correlated with higher levels of success. In a similar vein to P1, their other public relations strategies included speaking at conferences. P4 also felt attending networking events, and hosting film screenings or premieres helped bolster visibility. P4 specifically stated: "The strongest public relations strategies that have been successful for my business are social media, live interviews, appearances, panels and news."

P5 shared that public relations campaigns have been successful public relations strategies for her business, highlighting the importance of having others talk about their story and the broader impact of their achievements. P5 also leveraged social media and influencer marketing particularly for one of the restaurant brand as cost-effective public relations tools with notable time-saving benefits. According to P5:

> I believe getting the word out is vital when it comes to public relations strategies. When I became the recipient of a major tax credit, major success for the business was in having other people talk about that story, talk about the impact of public relations. So I think for me, that was one of the most successful public relations strategies for our business and why public relations has been vital for our business success.

P6 relied on cultivating relationships with celebrity hairstylists to gain exposure without incurring traditional public relations costs. However, they noted challenges in gifting their haircare products, including high expenses and difficulties in getting proper tagging and acknowledgment from celebrities. P6 recommended involving public relations professionals to optimize strategies and enhance the value of these high-profile partnerships. P6 stated: “I saw the influence of magazine placement and working with celebrity haistalust help my business gain exposure.”

P7 focuses on thought leadership and organic marketing efforts, such as workshops and facilitation, as key components of their public relations strategy. They recall a brief investment in public relations services, which led to media features in platforms like Essence magazine, Cheddar News, and BNC. Additionally, P7 uses tools

like Help a Reporter Out (HARO) to contribute expert commentary and establish themselves as a thought leader from varying perspectives. P7 stated:

> I was intentional about my firm's public relations strategy. It was not an inhouse public relations department but a partnership with a public relations consultant, and the idea was to get the firm more placement in media. I was able to do a interviews with Essence magazine, for example. So it was all about a media play, and there were a few other publications that the public relations consultant was able to help get placement on or in. I believe these are things that also lead to thought leadership from a different perspective for our organization.

Through the diverse approaches highlighted, each participant showcases the adaptability of public relations strategies. The public strategies can be customized to align with individual objectives and specific situations. The participants' success stories illustrate a broad spectrum of effective tactics. Effective tactics include harnessing the power of social media platforms, maximizing the potential of cross-brand collaborations, and establishing oneself as a respected thought leader in one's field. This demonstrates the versatility and potential of public relations in achieving a wide array of communication goals.

Correlation to the Literature

According to recent statistics (Statista, 2020a), there are 4.54 billion active Internet users globally, accounting for 59% of the global population. Stephen (2016) highlighted that people spend a significant amount of time online, searching for information, sharing experiences with other consumers, and engaging with companies. My findings agree with Stephen, who stated that organizations have responded to this

change in consumer behavior by incorporating digital and social media into their public relations strategies. Kumar and Pansari (2016) asserted that competition nowadays is fierce, fueled by rapid technological advancements and the growing influence of social media as a unified marketplace. SMEs that do not engage in effective public relations strategies risk being overshadowed by their competitors and missing out on potential customers.

Alongside building brand awareness, public relations play a role in shaping an SME's reputation. A solid reputation is important for any business, as it can positively impact consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Establishing a favorable reputation can be challenging for SMEs due to limited resources and minimal brand recognition. Effective strategies such as social media, influencer marketing, and community outreach can help cultivate a positive image for an SME. These branding efforts can foster trust with the public and highlight the company's values and commitment to its customers.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

While applying organizational capabilities theory, it became clear that the sustainability of public relations strategies for small businesses is closely tied to the firm's ability to develop and leverage unique resources and capabilities. The research findings highlight the importance of resourcefulness, relationship building, adaptability, and informal communication networks. When viewed through the lens of organizational capabilities theory, these elements provide a robust framework for understanding and enhancing the sustainability of public relations strategies for small businesses. Fehrer et al. (2022) believed public relations can facilitate value cocreation processes between

broad sets of stakeholders that drive positive social change, and shape institutional arrangements in general and public discourse in particular.

The research findings also support organizational capabilities theory, with one of the theory's major tenets being that firms with limited resources can still develop effective capabilities by leveraging existing resources creatively and focusing on core competencies. Small businesses might develop unique public relations strategies by utilizing social media or community engagement, which require fewer financial resources. Each participant discussed their budget constraints and their focus on creative, low-cost public relations strategies. Aligning with organizational capabilities theory which suggests that even firms with limited resources can cultivate effective capabilities. These organizational capabilities can be achieved by creatively leveraging existing resources and focusing on core competencies. For instance, constrained by budget limitations, small businesses might devise unique public relations strategies by utilizing social media platforms or actively engaging with their local community. Kumar and Pansari (2016) demonstrated how crucial it is for organizations, particularly in the context of trends and innovations like social media, where positive or negative news can spread rapidly, to continuously support and enhance employee engagement to drive business success. Each participant used social media as a primary tool for public relations to increase visibility, and engagement. Social media often requires fewer financial resources than traditional advertising campaigns yet can still yield significant results in brand awareness and reputation building.

Theme 2: Public Relations Budgets

The second theme emerging from the findings was the importance of public

relations budgets. While smaller businesses often operate with limited financial resources, the study revealed a remarkable trend: many participants increasingly recognize the value of public relations investing. Small companies give public relations minimal attention due to lacking resources and personnel (Polic & Solopek, 2020). Public relations, a service that large corporations with big budgets can afford, is now being adopted by SMEs as a strategic tool to build brand awareness, enhance reputation, and engage with key stakeholders. This shift in mindset signals a pivotal change in resource allocation for smaller businesses, emphasizing public relations as a critical driver of growth and long-term sustainability.

P3 advises implementing a public relations budget from the beginning of a business but aligning it with sales to ensure it makes financial sense. They shared that they didn't pay for advertising or marketing, believing their story was rich enough to attract attention without paid promotions. P3 hired a public relations professional after 20 years in business to promote their business, leveraging their rich legacy, brand, and celebrity connections to tell their story. P3 recommended that new businesses allocate a budget for public relations right from the start. They emphasized the importance of aligning this budget with sales projections to ensure that the expenditure is financially plausible, and justifiable. In their own experience, P3 initially relied on the inherent appeal of their brand story to generate interest, rather than investing in paid advertising or marketing efforts. They believed that their unique narrative was compelling enough to attract attention organically. It was only after 2 decades in business that P3 decided to engage the services of a public relations professional. By this time, they had established a strong brand identity and cultivated relationships with notable figures, which the public

relations professional could leverage to effectively communicate P3's story to a wider audience. P3 stated:

> People should actually implement a public relations budget in the beginning of their business, but I believe it should align with sales to ensure it makes financial sense. Although I have garnered public relations I never had to pay for public relations in any capacity. I've never paid for advertising, never paid for marketing because my story was rich enough to attract attention without paid promotions. After 20 years in business, leveraging our rich legacy, brand, and celebrity connections to tell our story our company has now hired a public relations consultant.

P1 strategized their budgeting for public relations, emphasizing the critical importance of ensuring that each company they owned needed to generate adequate revenue to justify allocating funds towards public relations activities. P1 successfully found a way to strategically allocate resources towards public relations endeavors to bolster the company's overall financial well-being and long-term profitability. P1 stated: “If I pay $20,000 monthly for public relations, did I make at least $100,000 because of my public relations opportunities?”

P6 recounted how a public relations company played a pivotal role in transforming their website. That involved a strategic overhaul that P6 directly linked to enhanced customer retention, and a subsequent boost in sales figures. The participant emphasized the invaluable perspective that external experts can bring to a business. In their case, the public relations company identified, and rectified, critical flaws in their business approach that had gone unnoticed internally. This positive experience with public relations consultants underscored the importance of seeking outside expertise to challenge assumptions and uncover hidden areas for

improvement. P6 concluded with a candid acknowledgment that their team needed to recruit individuals with greater expertise and insight to propel the company towards its ambitious future goals. Outside of public relations, this realization highlighted the importance of talent acquisition and team development in achieving sustainable business growth. P6 mentioned:

> Public relations was instrumental for me and I have hired different public relations companies. I know the importance of it, and over the years I've seen ways it helped my team. One agency helped when we needed to redo our website. I didn't know that the language that needed to be used was ways of attracting, pressing, and even garnering new customers.

P7 delved into the complexities of timing and preparedness when introducing a public relations budget within their business. P7 underscored the necessity of aligning a public relations budget with the company's inherent seasonality. P7 strategically balance the demands of client work with the imperative of business development. P7 highlights the multifaceted challenges entrepreneurs face in managing personal and professional responsibilities while planning for the long-term growth of their business. P7 stated:

> Again, timing is everything. It was at a point where I was also ready, and I think part of being ready is also showing up, because opportunity can present itself. But I will say, if it's a busy business development like new business season, to me, self-awareness would know this is not the time for you to commit to public relations, because you're going to prioritize client work. So I think there, to me, seasonalities. So I think I was approaching a slowdown, so it was the perfect time for me to invest into public relations.

The findings also showed similarities between P3 and P7, who both noted that balancing client work with business development, especially for small business owners with limited time and

budget, was important for business success. P3 and P6 noted that while costly, hiring a public relations professional can provide valuable expertise and effectively communicate your story, especially as the business grows and establishes a strong brand identity.

Correlation to the Literature

If small business owners want to remain financially viable, they need public awareness of their company, product, or services to be their best resource (Amstrong, 2016). Prioritizing a public relations budget can be a valuable starting point for organizations, based on the findings that almost all participants sought cost-effective ways to implement successful public relations campaigns without extensive financial resources. By carefully allocating funds and prioritizing key areas within a public relations budget, organizations can maximize their return on investment and ensure their public relations efforts align with their overall business goals and objectives. This budgeting approach allows for effective resource allocation and fosters a culture of fiscal responsibility and accountability within the firm's public relations team and the organization.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

Drucker and Heenan (2008), similar to Amstrong (2016), identified four key capabilities that firms must possess to remain competitive: knowledge, skills, processes, and resources. This includes financial resources, which are particularly important, as they enable firms to invest in public relations, new technologies, hire skilled workers, and expand into new markets. SMEs may struggle to keep pace with their competitors without adequate financial resources. They may struggle to innovate, attract customers, and retain talent. Not having financial resources can lead to a downward spiral, where the

business loses market share, experiences declining revenues, and ultimately faces the risk of closure.

Theme 3: Promotional Strategies

The promotional strategies employed by SMEs varied widely and emerged as the third key theme. P3, invested in events to generate content, network, and support their community. Others, like P5, organize community events such as block parties and educational seminars to connect with potential clients. P2 also uses a mix of digital and print newsletters, while P4 focused on providing value to customers through discounts and deals and also uses pop-up events to raise brand awareness. P6 emphasized collaboration and partnerships as key promotional strategies and leveraging AI tools for social media and other business tasks. Some participants explored paid advertising options, such as LinkedIn ads, while others found more success through organic methods.

P3 disclosed that their primary investment strategy revolved around sponsoring and participating in events that aligned with their business objectives rather than opting for direct advertising or paid appearances. They perceived these events as strategic investments that yield valuable returns in content generation, networking opportunities, and potential profit margins. These events often serve a dual purpose by supporting their family's non-profit organization and showcasing their commitment to social responsibility. P3 expressed their keen interest in exploring the potential of AI-powered tools such as ChatGPT, Claude, and Scribe to enhance their business operations and streamline workflows. Their current focus is on leveraging text-based applications of these tools to generate personalized outputs that cater to their specific business needs. By embracing these cutting-edge technologies, P3 aimed to optimize its business processes,

increase efficiency, and stay ahead of the curve in an increasingly competitive marketplace. P3 stated:

> Collaboration, building my brand, and helping other people build their brand. That's probably the most successful promotional paid tool. I'm still trying to save money cause that's hard, but saves me time, so yeah, it would be collaborating. In addition, we are working on creative work where we are distributing on different platforms, Spotify, YouTube, and Patreon. It's the same storytelling that we're doing, but in a different format. Our organization also started to get more into AI. Claude is a new one that I just downloaded. Scribe is also another one.

P5's promotional strategies included organizing and hosting block parties. These events serve the dual purpose of promoting her business while creating a relaxed and enjoyable environment for neighbors to connect and providing P5 with the opportunity to interact with community members in an informal setting. These block parties typically attract around 80 families, offering significant exposure and networking potential. P5 organized educational events covering a broad range of real estate topics, ensuring that community members can access up-to-date and relevant information. To enhance the value of these events, P5 occasionally invited guest speakers to share their expertise on related subjects, such as estate planning, further enriching the educational experience for attendees. These seminars and educational events typically draw in approximately 50 people, demonstrating consistent community interest and engagement. P5 stated:

> I do block parties as a promotional strategy to assist with building my business and clientele. Can you name 3 of your neighbors on your block? You probably don't know who your neighbors are. Do you know who the kids are that are

> running around this block because you want to make sure that your neighbors know who this kid belongs to, and that this kid is safe outside, you know, playing. So I decided to do block parties, but again the block party is not enough, and now they need to see me again. I then send them a newsletter. So people begin to remember and think of you when they think about real estate.

P2 employs a multifaceted approach to its promotional strategy, utilizing both printed and digital newsletters. They have implemented a flexible system that alternates between comprehensive quarterly newsletters and more streamlined, cost-effective flyers to optimize cost-effectiveness. This strategic adaptation allows them to maintain consistent marketing efforts, even during fluctuating business income. In addition to their newsletter strategy, P2 leverages a paid email marketing tool to enhance client management and curate relevant content suggestions. While P5 prefers personalizing their messages by choosing topics from the suggestions, but write their content based on independent research. P2 stated: “For paid promotion of my business I produce 2000 newsletters and mailers. I actually had to transition into doing digital newsletters, but I also do flyers and I alternate between the two.”

P4 shared insights into their promotional strategies, emphasizing the importance of offering value to customers. They gave specific examples such as "$7 Burger Tuesdays" and "50% Off Senior Nights," showing their understanding of the financial constraints within their community. These promotions are designed to appeal to a wide range of customers while driving traffic on specific days of the week. P4 stressed the necessity of integrating AI and technology into their business model. They recognized that embracing technological advancements can increase efficiency, streamline

operations, and provide a competitive edge in the marketplace. This approach demonstrates their commitment to staying ahead of the curve and adapting to the ever-changing business landscape.

In addition to value-driven promotions and technological integration, P4 highlighted the effectiveness of pop-up events at various venues. While not paid, these events serve as a powerful tool for generating brand awareness and expanding their reach. By setting up pop-up shops in different locations, they can introduce their brand to new audiences and create a buzz around their business. P4 understands that these events are not about immediate profits but building relationships, fostering community engagement, and getting people talking about their brand. P4 specifically stated:

> I think we have really, you know, dive in and plug into running promotion, understanding people are out there struggling, especially within communities. You know that we have $7 burger on Tuesdays and we have 50% off on senior night. So I think, you know, bringing the value back to the stores have also been successful for us. I also have to start thinking about, how do we infuse technology within our brand? You know, I just read something that the co-founder of Chipotle is looking to build a restaurant that is completely automated. The cooks are robots, everybody in the restaurant can be robots. So I think it's really bringing AI as you think about growing your business.

P6 discussed promotional strategies outside of public relations, emphasizing the importance of cross-promotion, collaboration, and partnerships. These strategies allowed them to expand their reach and have a presence in areas where they cannot be directly involved. P6 revealed they have not succeeded with paid advertising tools for their

business promotion. They discussed their daily use of AI tools for productivity and business tasks. An example of AI usage includes generating social media captions to save time and effort. P6 stated:

> I leverage cross-promotion with partnerships. So, say I have a business owner who does something complementary to the work that we do. As they're having a conversation with a prospective client, someone who is looking for possible services and they're not the person, or it can be an add-on to whatever it is that they're doing, then they can also mention us. So it's my way of being in rooms and selling when I'm not, and then I do the same thing.

Each participant utilizes a diverse range of promotional strategies. P3 focuses on networking and social media to target potential clients and showcase expertise. P4, prioritized value-driven promotions and community engagement through discounted offerings and pop-up events to boost brand awareness. P5 adopts a community-centered approach, organizing block parties and educational seminars to connect with and provide value to potential clients. Meanwhile, P2 leverages a combination of print and digital newsletters. Finally, Participant 6 emphasizes cross-promotion and collaboration, utilizing AI tools for social media content creation, but notes that paid advertising has been unsuccessful for them.

Correlation to the Literature

The research findings indicate that the participants employ traditional and innovative promotional strategies to generate content, establish networks, connect with potential customers, and offer value through discounts and special offers. This correlates with Çakirkay et al. (2021), who argued that manufacturers are increasingly adopting in-

store marketing tools like promotions, product samples, and sweepstakes. Çakirkay et al.'s perspective leans towards more established promotional approaches. The findings also correlate to Lim et al. (2022) that emphasized the significance of relationship marketing in the contemporary business landscape. The authors contend that building and nurturing customer relationships are essential for long-term business success and profitability. This promotional perspective highlights the necessity of cultivating customer loyalty and satisfaction through ongoing engagement.

These contrasting viewpoints from the literature underscore the importance of developing comprehensive promotional strategies that integrate traditional and innovative tactics. A well-rounded approach enables businesses to effectively connect with their target audience and achieve their marketing objectives. By incorporating established and emerging strategies, companies can create a synergistic effect that maximizes their reach and impact. The research findings suggest that a multi-faceted approach to promotion is crucial in today's competitive marketplace. By adopting a holistic strategy, companies can position themselves for success in the 21st century.

Integrating established methodologies such as print advertising, direct mail, and television commercials with emerging digital strategies like social media marketing, search engine optimization, and content marketing, companies can create a synergistic effect that amplifies their brand message and expands their market reach. The research findings in correlation with the literature, a multi-faceted approach to promotion is essential for navigating today's increasingly complex and competitive marketplace. A diversified promotional mix allows businesses to hedge against the inherent risks associated with relying too heavily on any single marketing channel. By diversifying

their promotional investments, companies can mitigate the impact of unforeseen market shifts or technological disruptions.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings from P4 on promotional strategies a) $7 Burger Tuesdays and b) 50% Off Senior Nights correlates to Hamilton et al. (2019) that explored how scarcity affects consumers' decision-making. These limited-time offers may drive consumers to make quicker decisions and prioritize those specific deals due to the fear of missing out. Research has shown that customer relationships lead to higher performance levels in business markets compared to consumer markets (Palmatier et al., 2005). The findings on promotional strategies from aiming to attract customers and encourage engagement from Ajiboye (2021) who argued that consumer engagement behavior is the manifestation that has a brand or firm focus, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers such as personal interests, values, and aspirations, can significantly impact customer engagement and purchasing behavior. Palmatier et al. (2005) and Ajiboye emphasized the significance of customer relationships and engagement in driving business success.

Theme 4: Public Relations Measurement

The fourth theme emerging from my findings was the importance of SMEs to measure their organization's public relations success. The findings presented a range of perspectives on what constitutes success in public relations. P1 equated success with tangible financial gains, such as increased revenue or new contracts. They also emphasized the importance of expanding their social media following, recognizing the role of digital platforms in modern public relations strategies. This participant's definition suggests a focus on measurable outcomes and a belief that public relations should directly

contribute to the bottom line. P2 adopted a more media-centric approach, measuring success through metrics like media views, the number of media mentions, and advertising value equivalency (AVE). This perspective implies a focus on generating widespread media coverage and maximizing the exposure of their brand or client. P3 definition of success encompasses both financial and reputational aspects. They aimed to generate revenue, positive impressions, and create favorable first impressions among stakeholders. This participant employed a multi-faceted approach to measurement, incorporating customer feedback, collaborations, and industry recognition. Their perspective suggests that public relations success requires a balance of financial performance and positive stakeholder relationships. P6 viewed public relations success primarily through the lens of sales, brand recognition, and brand expansion. This participant emphasizes the role of public relations in driving business growth and enhancing brand equity. P7 focused on the long-term impact of public relations, measuring success by its ability to build credibility and reach the intended audience. This perspective suggests a focus on establishing trust and cultivating meaningful relationships with key stakeholders.

P3 emphasizes that public relations measurements are not just about generating buzz but also about achieving tangible outcomes. P3 underscores the significance of impressions, both in quantity and quality. Generating a high volume of impressions through media coverage and other channels helps build brand awareness and visibility. P3 advocates for a data-driven approach that gathers customer feedback, tracks collaborations, and monitors recognition from various sources. P3 stated:

> It's hard, and it's not money. It's definitely through impressions. When people come to the store or the business, I always ask, “So, how did you hear about us?”

> I ask because I am always trying to track our public relations efforts against organic outreach.

P2 provided a specific example of how they gauge the success of their public relations efforts. This encompasses a multi-faceted approach that includes analyzing media views to understand the reach of their content, quantifying the number of media pieces generated to assess the breadth of their coverage, and calculating the AVE to estimate the monetary value of their earned media. By combining these metrics, P2 gave a comprehensive understanding of how they measure their public relations, the effectiveness of their public campaigns, and their overall impact on brand awareness and reputation. P2 specifically stated: "I measure the success of public relations by our media views, pieces of media, and advertising value equivalency (AVE)."

P1 evaluates the success of their public relations efforts by their organization's financial gains, which may include increases in revenue, profit margins, or stock prices. Additionally, P1 tracks the acquisition of new contracts, partnerships, and collaborations as a key indicator of measurable public relations success. Furthermore, P1 recognizes the significance of social media presence and monitors changes in follower counts, engagement rates, and sentiment analysis across various platforms. P1 specifically stated:

> I measure public relations based on the money and profit I make while doing these things. How many contracts did I sign, etc.? Did I walk away with at least one or two contracts? Did I get more followers on social media? How many followers did I get?

P6 elaborated on their approach to measuring the success of their public relations efforts. While acknowledging that sales figures can indicate public relations success, they emphasize that the primary goal of public relations is to build and expand brand recognition and awareness. P6

believes various metrics should be used to track progress towards public relations goals, such as media mentions, social media engagement, and website traffic. P6 stated: “I measure public relations with sales, but I know it is not just sales, because public relations is about brand recognition and expanding the brand's horizons.” P7 measures public relations success by building credibility, trust, engagement, and relationships with the target audience through compelling narratives and consistent messaging. P7 stated:

> I measure public relations by how it moves the needle, and it has to build credibility. That's the most important piece for me, the credibility piece. I don't always care about visibility because what's important is that the right people see it. I don't care that everyone sees it. I care that the right people see it, and it builds credibility amongst my current clients and potential clients.

The findings among these participants highlight the complex nature of public relations and the different ways success can be defined and achieved within the field. While some focus on financial results and media coverage, others prioritize reputation management, stakeholder relationships, and long-term brand development. This range of viewpoints underscores the importance of customizing public relations strategies to each organization or campaign's specific goals and context.

Correlation to the Literature

The findings of P1, P2, and P3 align with the economic aspect of corporate sustainability presented by Mio et al. (2022), as they emphasized financial gains and tangible outcomes as key indicators of success. P3's focus on international exposure through publications and guides can also be linked to the economic value aspect, as it can lead to new markets and increased revenue. P6's and P7's perspectives, focusing on brand

recognition, reputation, and relationships, correlate with corporate sustainability's social and environmental aspects. Building strong relationships and maintaining a positive reputation can contribute to social value, while brand recognition can be leveraged to promote sustainable practices and create environmental awareness. Gatto (2020) identified a few factors that accompany sustainability, which are new measurements, theories of human sustainability, and local development. These factors are connected to various perspectives on successful public relations. New measurements, such as financial gains and media impressions, are linked to quantifiable metrics, which are similar to the findings of Mio et al.

Correlation to the Conceptual Framework

The findings from the study align with Dyer et al.'s (2020) argument that strategy allows an organization to plan, implement, and prepare for future outcomes. The diverse perspectives on PR success highlight the importance of tailoring PR strategies to specific organizational goals. P1's focus on financial gains and new contracts aligns with using strategy to achieve measurable business outcomes. P2's use of media metrics and AVE demonstrates a strategy for managing and evaluating media presence. P3's emphasis on impressions and international exposure reflects a strategy for building brand awareness and reaching new markets. P6 and P7's focus on brand recognition and building relationships aligns with a strategy for long-term reputation management. These varied approaches to public relations measurement show that organizations use strategy to plan and implement public relations activities that support their overall business goals and prepare for future outcomes, supporting Dyer et al.'s argument.

Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) found through research that various strategies are adopted based on an organization's needs and their continual measurement of success or failure. These findings support and align with the research conducted by Chanana and Sangeeta, who argued that organizations adapt varying strategies based on their specific requirements and continuous performance evaluation and directly correlates with the diverse viewpoints on public relations success. The findings provide a comprehensive exploration of how different organizations, represented by P1 through P7, define and measure public relations success through a multitude of lenses, each influenced by their unique goals and priorities. Defining and achieving public relations success directly mirrors the findings of Chanana and Sangeeta, emphasizing the critical point that there is no universal, one-size-fits-all strategy for public relations success. Organizations must be agile and adaptable, tailoring their strategies to align with their unique needs and circumstances. Organizations must continuously monitor and evaluate their performance to ensure that their public relations efforts remain aligned with their overarching objectives.

Applications to Professional Practice

The findings of this study have various applications for professional practice in public relations within SMEs. SMEs can gain from developing tailored public relations strategies that utilize their unique strengths and resources. Tailored public relations strategies may encompass traditional and innovative tactics like social media engagement, relationship-building, events, media relations, and thought leadership. SMEs should prioritize public relations in their budgets and allocate resources strategically to optimize their return on investment. Allocating resources strategically SMEs could hire

external public relations professionals or invest in tools and technologies that enhance practical public relations efforts.

Additionally, SMEs can benefit from employing diverse promotional strategies that address their target audience and business goals. Depending on their available resources and desired outcomes, this might include events, community engagement, content marketing, partnerships, and paid advertising. SMEs should set clear metrics to assess the effectiveness of their public relations initiatives. These metrics should align with their goals and objectives, including financial results, media coverage, brand awareness, reputation, and stakeholder engagement. Finally, SMEs should embrace adaptability and resourcefulness in their public relations strategies, recognizing the importance of evolving their approaches in response to changing market conditions and emerging opportunities, experimenting with new tactics, leveraging technology, and cultivating strong relationships with key stakeholders.

Implications for Social Change

Based on my research findings, the implications for social change indicate that effective public relations strategies can lead to increased brand awareness, customer engagement, and, ultimately, business growth and profitability for SMEs. This enhanced economic sustainability allows SMEs to create additional jobs within their communities. The greater availability of employment opportunities can stimulate local economies, reduce unemployment rates, and improve the overall standard of living for community members. The emphasis on cost-effective promotional strategies highlights the resourcefulness and adaptability of SMEs. In turn, it fosters a more equitable and inclusive society where SMEs have more significant opportunities to thrive.

Recommendations for Action

The recommendations for action based on my research indicated that SMEs can strategically leverage a multifaceted public relations approach involving social media, community engagement, and partnerships to promote their businesses and build strong relationships with stakeholders. They should use social media as an effective and cost-efficient platform to connect with their target audience and enhance brand awareness. By creating engaging content and nurturing online communities, SMEs can develop a loyal customer base and amplify their message. Community engagement is a crucial element of business development, as active participation in local events, support for community initiatives, and collaboration with local organizations enable SMEs to demonstrate their commitment to the community and foster strong relationships with stakeholders. Involving increased trust, loyalty, and support from the community, ultimately resulting in long-term business success. Collaborations with other businesses, non-profit organizations, and government agencies can also significantly enhance business development.

By pooling resources, sharing expertise, and collaborating on projects, SMEs can achieve a more significant impact and reach a wider audience while accessing new markets, developing innovative solutions, and overcoming challenges they might not face alone. Integrating technology and innovation into public relations strategies allows SMEs to connect with a broader audience, streamline communication, and improve efficiency, enhancing SME visibility, a better reputation, and improved customer engagement. Ultimately, by leveraging technology and innovation, SMEs can drive progress and economic development, creating a positive ripple effect that benefits the entire

community. SMEs have a unique opportunity to foster business success and stimulate economic growth. By strategically leveraging social media, community engagement, partnerships, and embracing technology and innovation, SMEs can promote their businesses, build strong relationships, and contribute to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend several areas for further research. The first one would be a quantitative study that can measure the precise financial impact of public relations investments on SMEs, which would provide concrete data to support budgeting decisions. Although I was concerned the limitations in the study would be my own bias being that I am not only an owner of an SMEs in the public relations industry, I am also a consultant in the field.

My findings only ignite my passion for wanting to see further research focusing on specific public relations tactics that could explore the effectiveness of social media, influencer partnerships, and community engagement for SMEs in greater depth. This study focused solely on SMEs, and the research was limited to SMEs in the Northeastern United States, my findings show that further research should examine the role of AI in public relations for SMEs and how AI tools can be used to automate tasks, analyze data, and personalize communication to save money and time. Finally, investigating the relationship between public relations and other business functions, such as marketing and sales, could yield insights into how public relations can be integrated into a comprehensive business strategy.

Reflections

Looking back on this incredible journey, the initial determination to return to school and pursue a doctorate, to this very moment of near completion of my doctoral study, and recognizing the strides I have made, a bittersweet moment of emotions that wash over me. The path was filled with challenges that tested me and often pushed me to the brink of giving up on countless occasions. I am overwhelmed by a mix of pride, gratitude, and humility. The path was anything but easy; the setbacks, long hours, and sacrifices were constant reminders of the grit it takes to achieve something meaningful. The sacrifices, sleepless nights, and missed family moments were all part of this journey.

The demanding workload required meticulous attention and unwavering focus, often overwhelming me. Balancing the roles of CEO, founder, wife, mother, and student was mentally and emotionally exhausting, with days when the weight of it all felt unbearable. Despite the hardships and moments of doubt, pursuing knowledge and personal growth fueled my determination to persevere.

Conclusion

Section 3 bridged the research findings with professional practice, exploring their broader implications for social change. It began by aligning the findings with the research questions and conceptual framework and synthesizing these insights with existing literature. The themes from the data were analyzed with evidence from the interviews, which included public relations strategies, public relations budgets, promotional strategies, and public relations measurement.

The study's findings demonstrate that implementing public relations strategies in SMEs can enhance business sustainability. They provide insights into the importance of

integrating traditional and innovative promotional strategies to boost brand awareness and reputation for business growth and competitiveness. The study emphasized the significance of resource allocation for public relations, implementing measurement strategies to track progress, and adapting strategy in response to market dynamics and emerging opportunities. The research findings highlighted that a well-defined public relations strategy is crucial for the sustainability and growth of SMEs.

The implications for social change are also significant, as the study suggests that effective public relations can contribute to the economic sustainability of SMEs, leading to job creation, economic growth, and community development. By applying the insights and recommendations from this research, SMEs can optimize their public relations approaches, creating a more inclusive and equitable business ecosystem.

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Appendix A: Participant Scheduling Interview or Declining the Study Electronically

Hi,

Thank you for providing your consent to participate in my research study. I'm excited to move forward and would like to invite you to schedule a time for your interview!

Here's what you need to know:

- **When**: December 2 - 6, 2024
- **Duration**: The interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes
- **Where**: Online (link provided after scheduling)

To book your interview, use my Calendly link here: https://calendly.com/diypr/60min.

To no longer participate in the study, please email "I no longer consent to" nikkia.mcclain@waldenu.edu.

If you have any questions or need assistance, feel free to reach out to me directly at:

📧 nikkia.mcclain@waldenu.edu

📞 646.244.2140

Looking forward to speaking with you!

Warm regards,
Nikkia McClain

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Interview Protocol</th></tr>
<tr><th>What I will do</th><th>What I will say</th></tr>
<tr><td>Start the interview by exchanging greetings and introductions. Maintain a polite and professional demeanor throughout the phone call.</td><td rowspan="3">Hello, and thank you for participating in my research on public relations as an Approach for SMEs to improve business sustainability. Your insights on this topic are valuable, and I anticipate our discussion will last approximately an hour.
The interview will consist of ten questions. To ensure accuracy, I will record our conversation and take notes. Rest assured that your interview recordings will be confidential and accessible only to me. They will be securely stored and destroyed after the completion of this study.
As outlined in the consent form you received via email, your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the interview at any point if you feel uncomfortable, if I intend to inflict harm or cause you any discomfort. Thank you for agreeing to participate. I appreciate.</td></tr>
<tr><th>Observations</th></tr>
<tr><td>I will utilize active listening, nonverbal cues, paraphrasing (if necessary), and follow-up questions.</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Interview questions	*1. How has public relations help your business as a small business owner?*
	2. As a successful small business owner, what are some public relations strategies incorporated within your business model?
	3. What specific public relations strategies have you implemented?
	4. What public relations strategies successful for your business?
	5. How do you measure business success when it comes to public relations?
	6. What public relations strategies have saved you time and money to help your business?
	7. What promotional strategies outside of public relations are you using now to help position your business ahead of competitors?
	8. How are you positioning your businesses to pivot?
	9. When do you implement a budget for public relations for the business?

	10. What have been successfully paid tools incorporated into your business plan to help promote your business?