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Consumer Behavior-Based Strategies Small Business Leaders Use to Increase Online Sales Revenues

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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Abstract

Many small business leaders struggle to tailor online strategies that drive demand, limiting growth and differentiation in competitive digital markets. Business leaders must adopt data-informed, customer-centered approaches that align digital marketing efforts with consumer behavior and market expectations. Grounded in social exchange theory, the purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to explore the online shopping marketing strategies that some small business marketing leaders use to increase demand for products and services. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with six small business leaders from Vancouver, British Columbia; Toronto, Ontario; and Seattle, Washington. The four main themes identified using thematic analysis were (a) focus on marketing channel strategies; (b) personalized and trust-oriented customer engagement strategies; (c) goal-oriented innovation strategies; and (d) navigating barriers to strategic implementation. Recommendations included diversifying marketing channels, adopting new technologies, and maintaining a focus on target audiences to build customer trust, which plays a vital role in customer-vendor relationships. The implications for positive social change include potential for small business leaders to develop products that better align with consumer needs, promoting stress-free purchasing decisions, and strengthening consumer trust in vendors.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved family - my parents, my wife, and my son. I am deeply grateful for their unwavering support and belief in me. I also dedicate this project to my brother, who passed away in 2016. If he were with us today, I am certain he would have offered his support as well.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the incredible academic support from my supervisor, Dr. Gwendolyn Dooley. Thank you, Dr. Dooley, for encouraging me to persevere, even when faced with numerous challenges.

To my dear wife: thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement throughout the many days and nights I spent working on this project.

To my beloved parents: thank you for your gentle reminders to see this journey through to the end. Your subtle encouragement meant more than words can say.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Project

The role of small businesses in the economy is undeniable. Small businesses cover 99% of all companies in the United States and reached the number of over 33 million separate entities employing 61.7 million people across the country (U.S. Small Business Administration - Office of Advocacy, 2022). Around 36% of small businesses make sales online, but 28% of small businesses do not even have a website (Zippia, 2023). Out of 1.21 million businesses in Canada, 97.9% are small businesses (Government of Canada, 2022) employing approximately 5.8 million people (Government of Canada, 2025). The leading indicators to follow by marketers while working on the marketing strategy in the company are rivalry in the market and consumer reactions. Defining an appropriate marketing strategy is an effective response to the competition (Duralia, 2022). Marketing becomes more critical for business from year to year and requires more attention to introducing, influencing and maintaining potential consumer behavior, with marketing communication as an element required to start the business (Cochea Tomala, 2022). Using an appropriate marketing strategy and diversifying traditional and digital marketing approaches is essential.

Background of the Problem

Business leaders can use marketing techniques to propel revenue and profit. Enderle (2021) indicated that marketing is arguably the most potent tool for driving revenue and profit, yet it is among the first departments to face cuts during a downturn. For any small business owners, surviving by cutting costs and increasing revenue is the top priority in the first stages of the company's development. As a result, acquiring new

customers is one of the most critical challenges small business owners face, according to the survey by Wells Fargo and Gallup (Newport & McMurray, 2019). In 2021, one of the leading online marketing platforms for analytics surveyed 284 small businesses to discover the main marketing challenges. The top challenges were a lack of time and resources, a small marketing budget, and a clear marketing strategy and objective (Kochegura, 2021). The results demonstrated the importance of studying the subject of marketing strategies.

Business owners and marketers can use multiple strategies; nevertheless, each should have a healthy purpose of maintaining or increasing the company's profitability. Researchers have identified marketing strategies that can help small business owners, such as using systematic customized services or social media (Gilboa et al., 2019). Applying marketing strategies might lead to other possible challenges. Other researchers emphasized the role of privacy during different stages of company-customer interactions and the importance of perceived warmth characterizing the consumer's trust at a particular stage of the buying process (Aiello et al., 2020). With the changes in the world business paradigm caused by the pandemic and overall changes in consumer habits, marketing strategies require revision and adaptation to the new environment.

Business Problem Focus and Project Purpose

The specific business problem is that some leaders of small businesses lack online shopping marketing strategies to increase the demand for their products and services. Therefore, the purpose of this proposed qualitative pragmatic inquiry project is to understand the online shopping marketing strategies that some small business marketing

leaders use to increase demand for products and services. The target population is small business leaders from Canada and the United States who successfully use marketing strategies to increase demand for products and services, considering changes in consumer shopping behavior. Busetto et al. (2020) stated that the primary purpose of the sampling is to ensure observation of the information from different angles. I used purposive sampling to select participants renowned for their profound expertise and proficiency in marketing, with a specific emphasis on participants affiliated with small businesses. To access participants, I used personal connections and social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook. In social networks, I used professional groups to search for participants. The sample size for my research was initially planned as 12 participants with the possibility to extend the number of participants if the data saturation was not achieved. For the data collection, I used semistructured interviews.

The theory for this project includes the social exchange theory developed by Homans (1958). Homans suggested that the human social system contains interactions between individuals with rewards and punishments resulting from interactions. Homans explained that while the group, society, and community are a part of the social system, it is essential to understand individual behavior first. One of the theory concepts is that social behavior is an exchange of material and non-material goods – there is a cost of action and distribution of rewards. The cost-benefit analysis lies in the origin of the relationships between two individuals. The exchange is a foundation of economic theories.

In business, there is a constant exchange process between the company and its customers. A deficiency in management's engagement with customers often results in insufficient attention to their demands, desires, and attitudes, causing the organization to lose existing customers and struggle to attract new ones (Khan et al., 2022). Homans (1958) described profit from the interaction as a reward less cost. While shopping online, consumers have costs: They spend their non-material resources, such as time, browsing the website, and material resources, such as money, when making a purchase. In exchange, they plan to receive rewards such as positive experiences from interactions with the website or products and services based on their expectations. The expectations might depend on multiple factors, such as previous experience, and individuals will always look to obtain value in exchange for some cost (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This theory meets the purpose of this research: The process of product or service discovery and purchase online includes a cost-benefit exchange between business and consumer, while online shopping marketing strategies might increase the positive win-win result for this exchange. Online retailers and consumers have more complex and difficult reciprocality than that between offline stores and their clients (Toufaily et al., 2013). The use of this theory adds to the current literature regarding the strategies small business marketing leaders use to increase consumer demands for company products and services.

Research Question

What online marketing strategies do leaders use to increase demand for products and services?

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

The foundation of any research often relies on assumptions. Assumptions are integral components beyond the author's direct control but are essential for the relevance and coherence of the project (Simon, 2011). Assumptions permeate the entire research process, encompassing ideas, factors, or stances vital for completion (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2019). Although some authors challenge this notion, many acknowledge that philosophical assumptions significantly influence decisions in the research process and emphasize their importance in research reports (Coates, 2021).

This first assumption was that all small business owners engaged in online product or service sales possess either explicit or emergent marketing strategies. In other words, rather than taking random steps, they either follow a planned approach or emerge their strategies through the actions. The second assumption was that conducting interviews with the initially planned number of participants would yield sufficient data for comprehensive analysis and ensure data saturation. Furthermore, I expected that all interviewees would actively employ similar online selling approaches, would respond fully and honestly, and would be able to articulate their respective marketing strategies clearly.

Limitations

It is essential to consider project limitations. The limitation of the research is the systematic bias that can inappropriately impact the results, and the researcher cannot control that (Price & Murnan, 2004). The credibility and trustworthiness of the

interviewees might be challenges that create limitations for the project. I focused the project on small businesses with online stores with at least 1000 but no more than 100,000 visitors per month, focusing primarily on large North American cities. Online shopping marketing strategies leaders use in small businesses with less than 1000 or more than 100,000 website visitors per month can be different because of the intensity of web traffic and different data from observations. Online shopping marketing strategies used by small business leaders to target small towns that are not a part of large cities' greater areas could be different because of different consumer habits. Future researchers can extend their studies to online stores with more than 100,000 website visitors per month; however, in this case, a different approach to the analysis might be required.

Another limitation of this project can be that some small business organizations might not properly collect data about the success of their online shopping marketing strategies (for example, they might not correctly track the website data). The challenge of the research is to identify the organizations that meet the requirements, as the initial interpretation of data collection and analysis can differ from business to business. In the future, researchers might reduce the risk of this challenge as new technical opportunities, such as new software, can simplify collecting data for small businesses.

Transition

Marketing and consumer behavior remain essential for all businesses, specifically small businesses. In Section 1, I introduced the background of the problem by emphasizing the importance of customer acquisition and the main marketing challenges

for small businesses, including those that derive from implementing new marketing strategies. I presented a business problem and project purpose, described the selected research method and design, identified the population and sampling methods and posted the research question. I identified social exchange theory by Homans (1958) as the conceptual framework. As the final part of Section 1, I explained the assumptions and limitations of this project.

In Section 2, I will review professional and academic literature. I will focus on the social exchange theory and align it with online shopping and consumer behavior. I will also describe relevant alternative theories such as the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior, relationship marketing theory and marketing myopia theory. I will convey the definition of marketing strategies and the role of digital presence for small businesses.

Section 2: Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The literature review contains the following sections: (a) the review of the social exchange theory; (b) the review and assessment of the marketing strategy concepts; (c) the review of online presence concepts; (d) the review of online marketing concepts; (e) the review of the concept of small business and its online shopping marketing strategies.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is the theory that grounds this project. Homans (1958) was the first who introduced the social exchange theory. The author explained that the human social system contains interactions between individuals with rewards and punishments because of interactions. Homans demonstrated that, while the group, society, and community are a part of the social system, it is essential to understand individual behavior first. One of the theory concepts is that social behavior is an exchange of material and non-material goods; there is a cost of action and distribution of rewards. The cost-benefit analysis lies in the origin of the relationships between two individuals. Human beings are searching for more benefits with fewer costs spent and calculating the possible outcomes while starting the interaction. Another essential element the individual considers is expectations based on previous experience. Reinforcement principles suggested by Skinner (1953) became one of the foundations for Homans's theory. The behavior of one party can reinforce the behavior of another party and vice versa. Mutual reinforcement and the system of rewards and punishments became an essential element in theory by Homans. One of the theory propositions is that the more beneficial the outcome of the individual is the more chance a similar behavior will be repeated the next time a

comparable situation happens. However, there is a stimulus proposition, and Homans emphasized reducing the value of marginal reward units. In other words, continuous and frequent rewards will diminish the further rewards for the same actions. But the absence of the expected benefits might raise an individual's anger.

Many other authors provided their explanations for the social exchange theory. Blau (1964) considered social exchange as an essential process of social life that refers to individual actions motivated by the expected return. According to him, social exchange is the foundation of the relations between individuals and groups. Blau focuses on the social exchange structure and the processes at different levels. He considered social exchange as an action that solely depends on the rewarding reactions of others. Emerson (1976) described social exchange in sociology as an "economic analysis of non-economic situations" (p.336). Analyzing Blau's theory, Emerson summarized that, before taking action, people make decisions based on self-interested deliberation. At the same time, the individual who receives the gift tends to bring a return, even if it is unexpected by another individual who provided a gift. J. S. Coleman (1988) saw several weaknesses in the social exchange theory introduced by Homans and later by Blau. The first one is a limitation of micro-social relations, which limits the possibility to make a micro and macro transition from pair to the system. The second one is an introduction of principles in the wrong way — in an ad hoc fashion.

Some researchers emphasized the importance of trust in social exchange theory. Nasrolahi Vosta and Jalilvand (2023) stated that trust is a fundamental element of the theory. Ahmad et al. (2023) called the development of relationships through trust,

commitment, and loyalty an essential pillar of social exchange theory while it requires obeying the regulations. Therefore, trust should not be underestimated when applying social exchange theory.

Economical and Marketing Aspects of Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is also evident in the field of marketing. Lambe et al. (2001) stated that the exchange in social exchange theory might have economic and social results. The authors widely use social exchange theory in their studies related to marketing communications and consumer behavior. Zhou et al. (2023) identified interpersonal interaction factors and mediators that connect them with purchase intentions in social commerce. The findings of the study demonstrated that the interpersonal interaction factors between online sellers and recommenders increase trust, which, at the same time, positively impacts purchase intentions. The authors defined social exchange theory in the interaction as a process of the exchange of valuable resources via some activities and explained that social exchange exists in interactions between consumers and vendors as well as between consumers and recommenders. According to them, the exchange is made between members in social commerce. Ottley and Bechwati (2018) admitted that their research on different views of customers in marketing contributed to different marketing theories, including social exchange theory as a part of the relationship paradigm in marketing. However, the authors recommended future research on the impact of technologies on customers and the different dynamics of online marketplaces.

Some authors review social exchange theory from the perspective of trust in the economic relationships. Urbonavicius et al. (2021) explained the willingness to disclose

personal data during online shopping through social exchange theory. They based social exchange theory on social networking and online buying; however, the authors focused the study on European Union countries with strict privacy regulation policies, such as GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) and suggested elaborating on the subject by continuing to apply social exchange theory to data disclosure in future research. Lambe et al. (2001) stated that because the social exchange process is based on obligations rather than on contracts, the process of creating trust depends on and derives from obligations. The authors provided the example of social exchange between the salesperson and the purchaser when the latter agrees to buy more products in order to let salesperson reach sales goals. The salesperson then keeps the obligation which is discharged only when the reciprocal benefit is returned to the buyer. The increase in interactions and occurrence of reciprocation leads to the establishment and increase of trust (Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987; Lambe et al., 2001). Aiello et al. (2020) explained that the willingness to provide information to the business depends on the customer flow stage. The authors concluded that at the last stages of the customer journey, consumers raise more trust and, hence, the perceived warmth increases willingness to disclose personal information.

As for retail companies, collecting personal data to meet more customers' needs might be crucial, and for customers, the same process might raise concerns; it is critical to understand the specifics of each stage of interactions. Since those who participate in the exchange of resources develop psychological ties, they also establish a high level of trust. However, it is essential to note that weak reciprocity and unbalanced exchanges might undermine relationships, make them unstable, and directly impact trust and loyalty

(D. Y. Kim & H. Y. Kim, 2021). Consumers have higher intentions to purchase online when influenced by rewards and social motivations, including through trust (Irshad et al., 2020). Hence, trust plays a crucial role in social exchange.

Social Exchange Theory in Online Shopping

The aspects of social exchange theory go beyond traditional marketing and can be applied to social media communications and online shopping. Jahan and S. W. Kim (2021) concluded in their study of 305 valid samples the critical role of support in online communities for the motivation of community members' participation and, as a result, the benefits they get from this participation. Hou and Zhang (2021) analyze the impact of social support on social loafing in online brand communities. The authors stated that good social support may positively impact the feeling of community, develop strong emotional ties, and, as a result, increase psychological ownership and community commitment. According to normative belief, people perform in a certain way because they consider how others want them to behave; hence, they base their behavior on the perception of others related to their behavior (Soh et al., 2017). It mainly refers to closely related individuals.

Rezaei et al. (2016) described social commerce communication as an instrument to exchange, share and collect the required information for a purchase. The authors considered social commerce communication to have a direct and positive impact on the attitude toward social commerce, on the behavioral control of social commerce, and on the subjective norms of social commerce. As a finding, the authors confirmed the pivotal role of social media in the purchase decision-making process. Busalim et al. (2021)

conducted a survey-based empirical study with 203 participants. They demonstrated in their research that technological and motivational factors, especially social interaction and perceived value, determine customer engagement behavior on social commerce platforms.

Digital presence and participation in digital marketing activities might play a motivational role for small business owners. Ritz et al. (2019) collected data from 250 respondents and concluded that small business owners are motivated to participate in digital marketing activities directly. Lack of availability (less significant) and economic benefit (more significant) are the major factors for this decision. However, small business owners might lack the required skills and knowledge and have limited finances and management difficulties (Cromhout & Duffett, 2022). One of the challenges small businesses can face is balancing marketing opportunities with business capabilities while maintaining motivation to run marketing campaigns.

It is crucial to emphasize the importance of social exchange factors as motivation for small businesses. Hung et al. (2018) investigated variables that impact the intentions of small business sellers to continue engaging in social commerce activities. Based on the responses from 166 small online vendors (managers and employees), social exchange factors significantly impact small businesses' intention to engage in social commerce. Consumers' perceived effectiveness and informational support of social commerce may influence their will to engage (Hu et al., 2022). Factors like social media marketing activities may have a significant impact on users' intentions, and social identification has a crucial role in the mediation relationship between activities on social media and

satisfaction, which, at the same time, might impact users' intentions (Jamil et al., 2022). The combination of digital marketing and social exchange as motivational factors that influence small business behavior demonstrates the significance of further research to understand how small businesses describe their strategies.

Relevant Alternative Theories

Theory of Reasoned Action and Theory of Planned Behavior

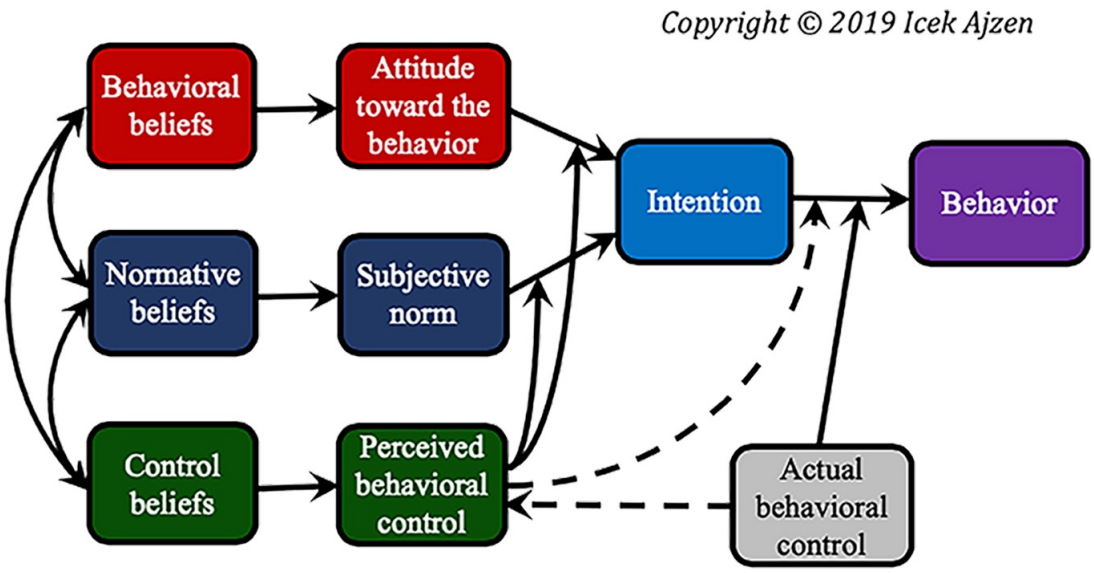
The theory of reasoned action by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) can be considered as a persuasion theory explaining and determining variables predicting behavioral intentions (Worthington, 2021). Fishbein and Ajzen explained human behavior from the perspective of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and actions. The behavior is based on the intention to perform it, and the intention is also based on the attitude to subjective norms and the behavior. The authors demonstrated that the theory of reasoned actions could be applied to different domains, including consumer behavior. Businesses can target consumers' attitudes, subjective norms, and beliefs to predict and influence their behavior.

The theory of planned behavior emerged later from the theory of reasoned action. Ajzen and Schmidt (2020) explained the theory as a behavior of interest regarding several components such as target, involved action, context, and time. Individuals do not engage in the behavior automatically; instead, they base their actions on specific and available behavior-relevant information influenced by a variety of behavioral beliefs. Subjective norms, which encompass perceptions of engagement in specific potential behaviors by others, often close friends or family members, influence individuals'

behavior. (Neighbors et al., 2013). In marketing, there might also be many triggers that can influence the further consumer behavior. These can be social circle, physical state, surroundings, and even time of the day.

Figure 1

Theory of Planned Behavior Diagram



Note. Reprinted from "Theory of planned behavior diagram", by Ajzen, I. 2019. Retrieved from https://people.umass.edu/aizen/tpb.diag.html

This theory is broadly discussed in publications. By April 2020, researchers had cited it in over 4,200 papers from the Web of Science bibliographic database across various fields such as health sciences, environmental science, business and management, and educational research. This extensive citation demonstrates the theory's widespread application across the social and behavioral sciences (Bosnjak et al., 2020).

With the appearance of the Internet and the development of online technologies, scholars have discussed this theory concerning marketing more often in their publications (Leong et al., 2023). While the theory of planned behavior had a significant amount of criticism and opinions to abandon it in favor of developing new theories for the consumer behavior research opportunities, it stays a solid fundamental theory for consumer behavior research. Researchers have been applying the theory of planned behavior in this field widely compared to any other theory (Rozenkowska, 2023). The survey among 120 young age respondents conducted by Gu (2019) demonstrated a statistically significant connection between perceived behavioral control and online shopping intention. Based on the research, the author, however, concluded that perceived behavioral control exhibited significantly stronger than subjective norms and attitudes.

While the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior are widely discussed and can be applied in marketing, I concluded that social exchange theory is a better fit for this research. Theories of reasoned action and planned behavior are more suited to studies focusing on consumers and their purchase behavior patterns, whereas social exchange theory explains reciprocal relationships and exchanges between two parties, such as businesses and consumers. Because the main focus of this research was on small businesses rather than consumers, I did not use the theories of reasoned action and planned behavior as the primary framework.

Relationship Marketing Theory

While one of the goals for most businesses is to attract new clients, keeping current clients and establishing positive relationships with them is essential. The concept

of relationship marketing was introduced by Berry in 1983 (Berry, 1983). Relationship marketing is “attracting, maintaining and – in multi-service organizations – enhancing customer relationships” (Berry, 2002, p.61). Both firms and customers can benefit from relationship marketing (Berry, 1995). This means that relationship marketing is essential for any business.

The relevance of relationship marketing might depend on several factors. Steblyakova et al. (2023) stated that businesses should pay more attention to relationship marketing when (a) they sell products or services which are complex and long-term, (b) the company is in a very dynamic market, (c) customers do not have enough experience in consuming a product and rely on trust to the vendor, (d) customer feelings while buying the product are as essential as the product, and (e) customers purchase behavior is based on the previous positive experience.

Researchers emphasized the role of relationship marketing in small businesses. For example, in the family business, conducting a relationship marketing strategy can improve the emotional intelligence of family members and positively impact performance (Gilani et al., 2024). Sa’adah et al. (2023) found that business owners can impact customer loyalty and customer satisfaction with the integration of relationship marketing along with the corporate image.

Researchers can apply relationship marketing theory to understand and analyze the fundamentals, goals, and intentions behind the relationships businesses maintain with consumers. While this theory is mostly based on building and maintaining relationships with customers, online marketing strategies used by small businesses to increase revenue

may involve factors beyond consumer relationships such as operational and exchange processes. Therefore, I did not choose relationship marketing theory as the primary framework for this research.

Marketing Myopia Theory

Theodore Levitt introduced marketing myopia theory in the 1960s. Levitt (1960) defined myopia as a lack of company attention to their customers' needs and wants, eventually becoming one of the most significant errors for companies. Rather than focusing on their products and services, Levitt suggested companies think more from their consumers' perspective. Industries endanger their future by misdefining their purposes. Using variable examples, Levitt also stated that businesses might fail because of the industry's narrow definition and, hence, missing opportunities for innovation and growth. Business owners can broaden their perspectives by developing a customer-centric mindset and adopting changes in customer needs. Patel et al. (2021) provided another definition of marketing myopia: a significant focus on immediate outcomes for the companies rather than a long-term focus, which might impact further investments in marketing capabilities. The authors stated that with the help of marketing myopia, small business leaders can repeatedly assess development and investment opportunities in relation to marketing capabilities and found that a significant focus on marketing myopia and marketing capability can limitedly impact the venture's survival.

Different authors might look at marketing myopia as a concept from different angles. Marketing literature contains recommendations for changes needed to stop accelerating myopia about, for example, social responsibility. Researchers might

overstate the responsibility and control of marketers concerning a micro-focus on consumers. The goal of marketing to act as a moral guide for consumers is not always possible and sometimes unjustifiable. While social responsibility is a fair business strategy, it should be considered in a broader way and originate from society and government as well rather than stay narrowed within a company's strategy (Cronin & Kerr, 2022; Gaski, 2022). Hence, researchers need to pay more attention to understanding the advantages and disadvantages of marketing myopia.

While the marketing myopia theory has remained relevant for dozens of years, it was recently reviewed by researchers. N. C. Smith et al. (2010) suggested a "new marketing myopia" theory derived from Levitt's (1960) theory. The authors described three phenomena of a new theory: (a) single-minded focus on customers, which can distract from other stakeholders; (b) too narrow definition of the customers and their needs; and (c) failure to recognize the changed societal context of business. Brennan et al. (2016) also noticed the concept of new marketing myopia by arguing that too thorough social marketing focus on consumer behavior change resulted in consumer myopia with limited chances to discover solutions for societal changes. Business owners can avoid myopia by mapping the company's stakeholders and making them noticeable, knowing better stakeholders, consistently engaging with them, and aligning with their orientation (N. C. Smith et al., 2010). Conducting customer research can also be one of the instruments to avoid marketing myopia.

Although marketing myopia theory has relevance in marketing research, I did not use it as the primary framework for this project. This theory tends to emphasize a

customer-centric perspective, warning businesses against focusing too narrowly on products rather than consumer needs. However, the purpose of this research was to explore the broader strategic approaches that small business marketing leaders use to drive online sales, which go beyond a strictly consumer-oriented approach. Social exchange theory, with its focus on reciprocal value and strategic exchanges between businesses and consumers, aligns more closely with this objective and was therefore selected as the primary framework.

The Description of Marketing Strategies and the Role of Digital Presence

Marketing strategies online are usually connected with three pillars of digital presence – paid, owned, and earned media. Cuthill (2013) defined each element of the digital presence as follows. Paid media includes paid promotional placements such as display ads and can be targeted and interactive (Vargas et al., 2023). Owned media can include promotional assets. Website or online applications, for example, can represent owned media. Earned media is brand-related customer engagement. Earned media messages can derive from both traditional sources, such as broadcast media, and digital sources, such as blogs and social media posts (Spotts et al., 2022). The company usually has no control over earned media, which gives no guarantee that the message will be caught and distributed (Abdow, 2020). Paid advertisements bring web traffic to owned media, simultaneously impacting earned media (Cuthill, 2013). The company must understand the usage of each media and the possible effect they can mutually have.

One of the fundamental marketing approaches that I discussed in this research is the integrated marketing communication approach. Since the introduction of integrated

marketing communication, this term has constantly been developing; however, scholars still have not agreed regarding its general concept and scope (Kliatchko, 2020). Persuit and McDowell Marinchak (2016) defined integrated marketing communication (IMC) as a consumer-based approach created in response to the needs of modern society, integrating daily consumer marketing practices and differing from the traditional product-oriented communication strategy. Gordon-Isasi and Ronda (2024) defined integrated marketing communication as the flawless alignment of communications and marketing media within organizations. Marketing communications are based on integrated marketing communications – the integration of communication messages, tools and means to ensure the consistency of message delivery (Nguyen et al., 2023). The concept of integrated marketing communications is essential for businesses as it serves to harmonize communication channels, leveraging the strengths of the most effective ones while compensating for the weaknesses of others (Rashkova et al., 2023). Integrated marketing communication has been a dominating element in building companies' marketing strategies. It has developed from a marketing-centric to a customer-centric approach, making this concept widely discussed in studies (Rehman et al., 2022). The concept of integrated marketing communication has been developing since the 1980s and faced many transitions over the last several decades. By this moment, marketing had transformed from a one-way announcement to a two-way conversation. Researchers seek to improve marketing operations within the integrated marketing communication concept to help companies reach better brand recognition, trust and loyalty by applying multichannel customer experiences (Adobe, 2022). Therefore, business leaders should

seek collaborations with researchers to establish a well-connected network of marketing activities across their stakeholders.

When discussing shopping, researchers do not pay enough attention to multi-channel shopping, focusing on a single-channel approach. However, the choice of shopping channels impacts consumers' decision process. Online channels affect consumers' psychological distance and make them focus more on the product's desirability than on feasibility. This fact impacts marketing strategies, as the company should advertise the product's value when there is an online shopping channel involved and product features and usability when the product is distributed through the offline channel (Xu et al., 2022). Lee and Choi (2023) described the effect of tactile sensitivity, which is essential to create mental stimulation for touch. The products must be created in a tactile-sensitive manner to stimulate mental simulation for touch during the online shopping process.

Small business leaders should consider the role of engagement in marketing strategies. Researchers provided multiple definitions of consumer engagement. Bilro and Loureiro (2020) defined consumer engagement as the psychological state resulting from relationship-based customer experiences, interactions with a brand, and consumer attitudes extending beyond purchasing actions. However, the definition of engagement given by small business leaders and used in small business companies might differ from those provided in the literature due to practical differences in approach. Additionally, small businesses might consider the term "brand engagement." A brand is a company identification and one of its most valuable assets (Petrovska et al., 2023). Susanti and

Samudro (2024) found that while rational brand quality is essential in brand engagement for both sellers and buyers, the role of emotional brand association and perceived value differs for each side of the transaction. However, limited to one industry, their research only provides a partial picture of the findings.

Researchers also demonstrated connections between brand engagement and other essential elements of companies' strategies. Tiep Le et al. (2023) found significant and positive relationships between corporate social responsibility and performance and, simultaneously, between corporate social responsibility and brand trust and loyalty in small and medium enterprises. Wei (2022) demonstrated a direct organizational brand-building strategy connection with employee-based brand equity; however, at the same time, did not find any direct connections with organizational brand equity. There are three dimensions of consumer brand engagement: (a) cognitive processing in interactions between brand and consumers when brands may use different social media platforms to increase those interactions, (b) affection - a level of positivity during the interactions, and (c) activation - a level of energy, effort and time consumers spend in interactions. (Tandy et al., 2023). These dimensions are equally essential for both – traditional and eCommerce marketing.

Different authors give many different definitions of eCommerce. Laudon and Traver (2021) defined e-commerce as digital transactions between companies and individuals that involve the usage of the Internet, Web, and mobile apps. Kogila et al. (2024) characterized e-commerce as an exchange of personal information to make a purchase through the Internet. In the 1990s, with help of the Internet, businesses

transformed and changed worldwide and became a commercial channel. The evolution of eCommerce includes steps such as worldwide web creation in 1991, the introduction of the first Internet browser - Netscape Navigator, in 1994, and the foundation of eBay, a consumer-to-consumer (C2C) marketplace, in 1995 (Ferrera & Kessedjian, 2019). Website owners can understand users' purchasing behavior by analyzing different website data, such as visitors' clicks. Once the analysis demonstrates clear patterns, the website can be improved. Companies that have an online presence have advantages compared to those that do not, as digitalization positively impacts their daily operations and specifically administrative routines and product development (Szucs, 2020). Hence, paying attention to strategies that small businesses can use to improve their online presence is crucial.

The digital economy's role in small company development became a global trend with the COVID-19 pandemic. The global digital advertising market has been growing with the tendency to grow in small business support. The share of small businesses in the GDP of some developed countries is high: 52% in the United States, 49% in France, 40% in Great Britain and 53% in Japan (Kasimova, 2022). The development of traditional marketing and the Internet increased the application of digital marketing by small and large companies (Saura et al., 2023). By using digital marketing, specifically social media, small businesses aim maximization of profitability. Content, engagement, and traffic are three main pillars that form the scientific basis of Internet usage by small businesses (Luzhnova & Fedorov, 2022). Researchers have also recently realized the importance of digital marketing in the B2B sector for small and medium enterprises (K.

H. Kim & Moon, 2021). Small business leaders may benefit in the markets, manage competition, and improve client relationships through value proposition by acquiring digital skills and further using digital capabilities (Aziz, 2022). While traditional marketing is still popular, a digital presence is required, and digital marketing has become necessary for business strategy (Gabelaia & Tchelidze, 2022). With the increase of mobile technologies that include website adaptation, applications, QR codes, and others, small businesses can quickly match the business models they use with the customers' expectations (Saura et al., 2023). Business leaders can also use digital technologies to improve processes and help the business to step away from traditional working models (Bouncken et al., 2021). Hence, it is critical to increase the role of digital marketing in the company's development plan.

However, adopting digital marketing in small and medium firms is challenging. Many small and medium business owners still do not include digital marketing in their strategy, and the popularity of this channel is still low (Suroso & Rafinda, 2021). Besides, integrating new innovative models, including digital ones, for long-existing businesses can be challenging as they conflict with current models (Bouncken et al., 2021). The adoption of social media practices needs improvements - while economic actions represent the balance between companies' and customers' interests to obtain sustainable relationships, social media provides an opportunity for small businesses to establish these relationships at a relatively low cost (De Clercq et al., 2010; Lupo & Stroman, 2020). While digital metrics are crucial in helping businesses to measure and improve their performance, over 50% of small businesses fail in the first five years suffering from the

management's limited technological expertise and access to high-cost online technologies, focusing on survival instead of development and growth (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Gabelaia & Tchelidze, 2022; Kovalenko & Kuzmenko, 2020). Even if the company has marketing managers, they usually lack power - the company's owner makes most of the decisions, including those related to marketing (Setkute & Dibb, 2022). By underestimating the role of marketing, the company might only strengthen the development challenges and decrease sustainable growth opportunities.

Besides, it is essential to consider the generational difference while planning marketing strategies. For example, Generation Y considers rational decisions, while Generation Z follows a deal-hunting behavior focusing on enjoyment. However, at the same time, both generations have a similar overview of risks, such as financial and product performance-related risks (Agrawal, 2022). Therefore, while there might be differences between generations, it is critical to determine the similarities as well.

Many researchers confirm small and medium enterprises opportunities if they go digital or online. While many small and medium companies lack online presence and e-commerce adoption, the Internet provides convenience, flexibility, and accessibility to both consumers and businesses (Costa & Castro, 2021). Adopting e-marketing opportunities can be significant for small businesses aiming to obtain convenient consumer services, reduce costs and increase overall profitability (Al Asheq et al., 2021). Benefits such as low costs of managing the company's profile on some social media platforms, two-way communications with new and existing customers, and the opportunity to reinforce brand loyalty made social media and digital marketing more

attractive to businesses (Lupo & Stroman, 2020). With the changing paradigm of competitiveness in the business environment, the focus on the technologies and their potential adoption is critical for small and medium enterprises growth in the future (Lányi et al., 2021). Lim et al. (2021) emphasized the advantages of online advertising for small businesses if their target audience is Generation Z and onwards due to the lower comparing to traditional marketing costs. While small and medium companies usually have a different budget than large corporations, low-cost marketing can benefit their strategies.

Transition

The literature review demonstrated researchers' interest in applying various theories while studying marketing as a concept. In Section 2, I described social exchange theory as a conceptual framework for this project. Additionally, I reviewed relevant alternative theories: the theory of reasoned action and planned behavior, relationship marketing theory and marketing myopia theory. While all of the alternative theories are relevant to marketing research, their primary focus is too narrow and therefore does not align well with the purpose of this project. In contrast, social exchange theory emphasizes broader reciprocal relationships and exchanges between two parties, such as businesses and consumers, making it a more suitable framework for this research. I have also explored how researchers describe marketing strategies and their application in small businesses.

In Section 3, I will consider the role of the researcher and their relationship with the research subject. I will explain the main elements of the project ethics and provide

details about the nature of the project. I will also discuss data collection activities considering the population and sampling selected for this project. I will finish the section discussing the reliability and validity of the research.

Section 3: Research Project Methodology

Project Ethics

I am the primary research instrument in this project. The researcher is a crucial qualitative research data collection and analysis instrument (Karagiozis, 2018). It was essential to ensure that my presence did not unduly influence the research results. I used my professional network to recruit six business leaders for the interviews conducted for this project.

Ethics is a fundamental component of every research, and the researcher must consider the elements of ethics from the very beginning of the study process. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University controls research compliance with the university's ethical standards and U.S. federal regulations. Hence, before I recruited and collected data from the participants, I obtained approval from the IRB. The approval number is 11-07-24-1135646. The Belmont Report requires researchers to follow basic ethical principles: (a) respect for persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice. Participants must be aware of the conducted research and have a right to consent or deny participation. Researchers must first provide participants with a list of possible risks and then obtain consent before proceeding with the project (Josephson & Smale, 2021). For Zoom calls, I emailed participants the informed consent form and a list of risks.

I waited for a signed consent form (in writing or electronically) and only scheduled an appointment afterward. I ensured that participants understood that they can withdraw from the project at any time, voluntarily and without any penalty. They could notify me about this by email or during the interview. While their participation could be

stopped immediately, I would provide an acknowledgment receipt in response if they used email for communication.

I conducted the interviews via Zoom (virtually). I scheduled appointments based on the participants' availability. Before I started the interview, I checked again that the participant signed the consent form and asked if there are any related questions. I then explained once again the purpose of the interview and how the data would be used and stored once the interview is completed. During the interview, I knew the names of the participants and addressed them using their names; in my research, I do not disclose any personal names of the participants or the companies. I name each participant as P1, P2, ..., P6. I also masked the organization's identity to follow the standard for Walden capstones. To maintain privacy during data collection, I took precautions for Zoom interviews, such as ensuring the interviewee was in a comfortable environment before the questionnaire begins. Only the audio recordings were saved for the purposes of this project. I kept my notes in a secure location to prevent unauthorized access.

Once the data were collected, I shared the findings with the participants to ensure the data was correctly interpreted. I securely stored obtained data in an encrypted storage system to prevent data leakage. I have a separate flash disk accessible only to me to store the archived file with the interview transcripts. To ensure security, the archived file was locked using a strong password containing letters, numbers, and symbols. The data will be stored for five years after the interview, after which it will be wholly deleted according to the required storage protocols.

Nature of the Project

In this project, I used the qualitative research method. With the help of qualitative research, the researcher understands the reasons, opinions and motivations behind the studied subject (Byrne, 2022). The researcher also may collect a wider range of viewpoints (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002). As a qualitative methodology is a human-focused approach, scholars use it to explore the why questions, diving deeper into the experience, perceptions, behavior, and beliefs. The interpretation of reality with the possibility of multiple meanings makes qualitative methodology constructionist (Given, 2016). In this research, small business leaders shared their online shopping marketing strategies, which might broadly be similar but differ in specifics.

The leaders can construct their strategies based on their perception of the business reality and shape them based on their beliefs and experience – similar to the principles of constructionism. As the aim of the project is to explore how some small business marketing leaders describe online shopping marketing strategies to increase demand for products and services, the quantitative method was not appropriate. One of the weaknesses of the quantitative method is the researcher's detachment from the respondents, which creates difficulty in studying the events as they are in nature (Eyisi, 2016). Quantitative methodology usually considers positivism, which overlooks reality as objective and prevents multiple meanings.

Besides the qualitative method, some researchers prefer a quantitative or mixed approach. The quantitative method aligns with the positivist paradigm, which considers phenomena as objective and required measurement (Maksimović & Evtimov, 2023). The

researcher uses objective measures such as surveys with the application of statistical and numerical data analysis in the quantitative approach. A quantitative approach can be applied to analyze the massive data available on social networks, websites, and other resources. Researchers can model and predict data with contemporary methods like text mining and tools based on artificial intelligence and machine learning (Akeb et al., 2022). I did not use a quantitative approach in this project as one of the intentions of this research is to let participants express their opinions more broadly.

I used a descriptive research design to address the research questions in this qualitative project. This approach is appropriate for this project because the scholars may describe people's feelings about the problem (Rahman, 2016). Those who plan to use a qualitative research method have a variety of approaches available to apply, such as phenomenological, ethnographic, grounded theory and others. A qualitative descriptive design is used to describe individuals, events, or conditions and study them as they are in nature (Houser, 2008; Siedlecki, 2020). The purpose of qualitative descriptive design is to identify the problems within an institution, summarize specific events that individuals or groups experience, or assess the variation of practices across multiple institutions (Grove et al., 2012; Siedlecki, 2020). Being the least "theoretical" among the other qualitative designs (Lambert & Lambert, 2012), descriptive design has overtones with them. The design requires specific attention to the formulation of the questions in interviews or surveys to increase the reliability of the results. With the descriptive design, I identified small business leaders' main ideas and challenges in their online shopping marketing strategies. Even if the locations and types of businesses might overlap in this

research, the expected similarity in strategies might be neglected based on each small business leader's specific experience in the past.

There are reasons why I focused on descriptive design rather than the others. For example, researchers use ethnographic research design to demonstrate beliefs, visions, and practices supported by a given culture. Some authors consider this approach to be the most common way of "specific" research (Masullo & Coppola, 2023). While using the ethnographic design, the researcher focuses on the process rather than the result (Argyriadis, 2021). In case study research, researchers focus on understanding, predicting, and controlling the organization (person, industry, etc.). The central part of this approach is research issues, theory and empirical inquiry (Woodside, 2010). When the information is required directly from those undergoing the phenomenon and the resources, including time, are limited, a researcher can apply qualitative descriptive design (Bradshaw et al., 2017). This is why I chose a descriptive research design instead of an ethnographic or case study design.

Population, Sampling, and Participants

The research population are small business leaders who successfully use online marketing strategies to increase demand for products and services considering changes in consumer shopping behavior. Defining small businesses before starting the participants' recruitment process is essential, yet the definitions vary depending on the authors and time. In 1981, the SEC defined small businesses based on income. Ang (1991) provided a definition based on the business approach and described small businesses as non-public, lacking limited liability and diversification but prone to risk-taking. Finally, some authors

determined small businesses to be organizations with limited access to funding (Anastasia, 2015). I interviewed six small business marketing leaders from large Canadian and United States cities.

The main goal of the sampling is to ensure the information for all objects is presented in the sample and observed from all possible angles (Busetto et al., 2020). I used purposive sampling to select participants renowned for their profound expertise and proficiency in marketing, with a specific emphasis on participants affiliated with small businesses. Examples of marketing leaders include but are not limited to chief marketing officers, marketing directors, and vice-presidents in marketing. In small businesses, the company's founder may also have marketing responsibilities. While purposive sampling has certain limitations, such as a narrow population, other factors, such as location, might also influence the sample (Doyle et al., 2020). Raymond et al. (2018) stated that it is essential for population recruitment success to know the audience from which the samples are built. There are many challenges that the researcher might face during the recruitment process, such as potential participants may ignore the interview invitation. This is why I did not use a random sampling technique.

While the process of recruitment may be more complex if the researcher is limited in the source of searching for participants, social networks might become an effective way to find enough candidates without high costs and resource waste (Raymond et al., 2018). For my research, I used personal connections and social networks such as LinkedIn and Facebook to find the participants. In social networks, I searched for the participants using professional groups.

To gain access to the participants, I used the following strategies: (a) evaluate my business network and crystalize a list of potential candidates for the participants; (b) create a list of professional associations and organizations of businesses in the research territories (Vancouver, BC; Toronto, ON; Seattle, WA). As an example, it could be British Columbia Chamber of Commerce, Startup Grind communities, The Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas (TABIA), The Seattle Metro Chamber of Commerce, etc.

Understanding how to reach out to the right individual or gatekeeper who can help achieve appropriate research results is essential. Aaltonen and Kivijärvi (2019) defined gatekeepers as individuals who can provide or deny access to the research field. Gatekeepers can oppose the research for various reasons, such as potential burdensome due to workload and possible threat to the study for the organization and its clients. However, it is essential for researchers to survey through gatekeepers in case there is no available sampling frame (Lamprianou, 2022). Therefore, I tried to identify gatekeepers' perceptions of the research to find the correct approach.

It is also essential to establish a working relationship with the participants. I organized virtual calls using Zoom. Before reaching out to the potential respondents, I obtained approval from Walden University's IRB. Before starting the interview process, I provided participants with the approved informed consent form. I ensured transparency in the process and that the participant had autonomy, as it was critical to understand the concerns and information needs of participants (Lutomski et al., 2023). Pietrzykowski and Smilowska (2021) stated that even if participants sign the consent form, they still

might have a limited understanding of the research information. I explained the purpose of the project and the importance of the potential research contribution to small business development. I also provided confidentiality terms and confirm voluntary participation disclosure.

The final sample size for this research was six small business leaders from three North American cities (Seattle, WA; Vancouver, BC; Toronto, ON). The main focus was on the Northwest region; therefore, I interviewed four participants from Vancouver, BC, and Seattle, WA. I also interviewed two more small business leaders from Toronto, ON, to show the difference or confirm the similarities between the small business marketing strategies in the Northwest and Northeast areas. While sample sizes in qualitative research are widely discussed, they are typically smaller compared to quantitative studies, where sample sizes are more established.

Researchers often choose smaller samples in qualitative studies to better support in-depth, case-oriented analysis. (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Six small business leaders provided enough data to understand online shopping marketing strategies and leaders' approaches to facilitate them. While I initially planned to interview 12 participants, the final total was six, as data saturation was reached after the fourth interview. Vasileiou et al. (2018) stated that the researchers should consider two main criteria in determining sample size: information redundancy and data saturation. Therefore, I increased the number of interviewees to a maximum of six to ensure data saturation was achieved.

One of the main goals the researcher needs to obtain in their project is data saturation. Braun and Clarke (2019) defined data saturation as when the researcher

cannot get new information, codes or themes from the data. Fusch and Ness (2015) stated that the definition of data saturation is not universal, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The main purpose of data saturation is to reach a qualified sample size. The data saturation is successfully reached when the data is exhaustive to reply the research question, and the researcher does not need to collect more data as it will not contain new information (Fofana et al., 2020). While in quantitative research, the quantity of data is essential, in qualitative research, it is a quality. However, the researchers are still disputing the correct number of interviews needed to achieve data saturation (Chitac, 2022). Many factors might impact sample size. According to J. Morse (2020), those factors can include (a) complexity of the studied phenomenon, (b) scope of inquiry, (c) flexibility of data collection, (d) number of used strategies, (e) variation of participants, (f) complexity of research methods; (g) researcher's expertise; and (h) the nature of the participants. To ensure that data saturation is achieved, I collected the data until no new themes are discovered and until I hear repetitions in participants' answers.

Data Collection Activities

As a researcher, I am this project's primary data collection instrument. As each researcher possesses unique characteristics, each might uniquely influence the empirical data collection, with specific traits having the potential to be more effective in evoking narratives from the interviewees (Pezalla et al., 2012). To collect data, I used semistructured interviews and maintained a reflexive journal to track the research process and identify critical elements of the research through an internal dialogue. I conducted all interviews via Zoom (virtually).

There are several advantages to using semistructured interviews as a primary source of data collection. Peesker et al. (2019) described semistructured interviews as flexible and, at the same time, structured methods for data collection that allow participants to share their feelings, which can lead to a broader disclosure of the phenomena of interest. While during structured interviews, the researcher usually has predetermined questions queued in the same way to all participants, in semistructured interviews, the researcher might have a few predetermined queries but may use follow-up questions that allow the researcher to dig deeper into the subject (McGrath et al., 2019). I had a list of prepared questions for all participants. For each question, I had a list of follow-up clarifications that might be added or skipped depending on the interview flow. While the number of follow-up clarifications may vary from one interviewee to another upon the necessity, I used the same list of leading questions and pre-set the interview time equally for all participants. I used an interview protocol (See Appendix B) to avoid errors and the risk of derailing the interview flow.

I adhered to an interview protocol to maintain a structured and consistent interview process for all participants. I used the following steps:

1. Preparation Post-IRB Approval: Upon receiving approval from the IRB, I confirmed the availability of selected participants to schedule interviews via Zoom calls.
2. Establishing Rapport: Before the interview, I established a rapport with participants to ensure transparency and structure throughout the interview process. This involved preparing rapport-building strategies in advance,

including the distribution of rapport templates tailored to the familiarity of each participant. I provided a clear explanation of the research purpose, interview conduct, data analysis process, and data storage methods in layman's terms. McGrath et al. (2019) stated that the researcher needs to incorporate a personalized approach in the invitation letter, suggesting a specific interest in the participant's involvement.

3. Informed Consent: I shared an informed consent form, detailing participants' rights and the voluntary nature of their participation, as highlighted by Josephson and Smale (2021). Acknowledgment of the receipt of signed consent forms was conducted via email.
4. Interview Process: I asked participants to discuss marketing strategies in their small businesses, mainly focusing on online shopping strategies to enhance product and service demand. I used probing questions for deeper insights, with adjustments made as necessary for clarity or comfort.
5. Recording and Transcription: I recorded the interviews — video and audio for calls conducted through electronic means (e.g., Zoom). Only the audio recordings were retained for the purposes of this research. This approach allows for a comprehensive investigation of raw data, facilitating a more detailed analysis, as emphasized by P. Coleman (2021). Notetaking complemented recordings to identify themes and keywords, assisting in structuring verbatim transcriptions.

6. Data Verification: I conducted a member checking to verify the accuracy of data interpretation with participants.
7. Data Analysis: I analyzed the interview transcriptions and notes using thematic analysis with the support of Microsoft Excel and NVivo 15, a software tool for data organization. I securely store all data following IRB guidelines.

This structured approach ensures the integrity and reliability of the research process, fostering meaningful insights into the marketing strategies of small businesses. As it is essential to have a credible data source, during the research, I enhanced the reliability and validity of the instruments by using several approaches to search and select the interviewees. I leveraged my professional network, including platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and various professional associations and organizations, to identify and connect with verified experts. I considered the person's expertise and mutual or reputable connections to verify their expertise.

The importance of selecting reliable data sources cannot be overstated, as this is crucial for avoiding potential biases and ensuring the accuracy of research findings. One such bias is sampling bias, where certain population members are more likely to be selected for interviews, increasing the risk to the research process. To mitigate this risk, I approached leaders of small businesses who have achieved success through their online marketing strategies. They were also more likely to agree to participate in the interviews. In contrast, leaders with recent failures could undervalue their marketing efforts and be averse to sharing their experiences.

To ensure data accuracy, I used the member-checking technique. This technique is often seen as a productive practice and leads to trust in the researchers (Stahl & King, 2020). Once I completed the interview, I consolidated the data collected, analyzed it, and shared it again with the participant to ensure the data is collected properly.

Interview Questions

1. What effective online marketing strategies have you used to increase demand for products and services?
2. What strategies do you use to market the rewards of your products and services to increase demand for them?
3. What challenges do you encounter when implementing these strategies?
4. How did you overcome the challenges?
5. How do you measure the success of your strategies?
6. What additional information would you like to share about effective online marketing strategies that we have not covered?

Data Organization and Analysis Techniques

As the researcher, I must meticulously organize and securely store all data collected throughout the research endeavor. I used Microsoft Excel as my primary tool to structure and manage the interview schedule and process effectively. Additionally, I maintained reflexive journals and research logs to track every aspect of the research process methodically, ensuring thorough documentation and analysis. To analyze the data, additionally to Microsoft Excel, I used Nvivo 15. NVivo is an AI-powered software that helps researchers with data organization, codes and theme detection (*NVivo* -

Lumivero, 2023). While NVivo has many advantages, the disadvantage is the time-consuming learning process of using this software (Elliott-Mainwaring, 2021). I learned how to use Nvivo effectively and adequately with the help of tutorials that are available on open-source platforms such as YouTube.

I store the data received from the respondents securely. As all my notes and recordings are in a digital (electronic) format, I keep them on a separate hard disk archived in a ZIP file. I stored the data related to each respondent as a separate file. I set up a unique password for each file and will keep them for 5 years, after which I will delete them.

I applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis process in my research. Braun and Clarke defined thematic analysis as an essential, flexible, foundational method for organizing the data in detail by identifying, analyzing, and reporting data patterns or themes. By identifying a theme, the researcher captures vital details for the research question that contain patterned responses. While in some reactions, the theme might be clearly visible, and in others, it might not be represented at all, there is no considerable size of the theme required. Researchers can use thematic analysis when they need to summarize multiple features of a big data set. One of its advantages is that to use this accessible type of analysis, researchers do not need a deep understanding of other qualitative approaches (Nowell et al., 2017). Compared with other approaches, a disadvantage of the thematic analysis is the inability to make claims about language use. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the analysis, I identified key themes with the patterns the participants describe more often than others.

Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed six phases of thematic analysis: (a) familiarization with the data; (b) generation of codes; (c) themes searching; (d) themes reviewing; (e) themes definition and naming; (f) report production. I did my analysis based on these steps:

1. I made sure to familiarize myself with the data collected. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that if the researchers collect the data through interactive means, they assess it using the immersive approach and applying prior knowledge. "Repeating reading" is an essential stage of the familiarization with data. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) suggested assembling the data into a functional form to ensure meaningful responses to the research question are found. Researchers can transcribe the data to see it easily. I collected the data by conducting interviews and studied interview transcripts. The closeness to the data during the transcription stage can help with the other steps of the data analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). While reading the data, I applied my prior knowledge and expertise from the subject field to find patterns.
2. Based on the collected data, I generated the codes. Clark and Vealé (2018) defined code as a word, phrase, or sentence that describes data elements or demonstrates its essence. A coding strategy can be based on a previous literature review and created a priori. While coding, the researcher should be able to identify the actors and their roles (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended considering as many potential themes as possible while coding and keeping some surrounding data to avoid losing

context. I used Microsoft Excel and NVivo 15 as data organization and analysis software.

3. When I completed collecting an exhaustive list of codes, the next step was to organize all codes into themes. The themes differ from the codes as they are more commonly broader. Researchers should consider themes as codes extracted from the data structured under the same subject. During this step, I used visualization, such as tables and mind maps, to simplify the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Rather than a quantitative exercise, researchers should consider this step beyond the regular analysis of frequencies to clearly understand the meaning of the extracted data (Lochmiller, 2021). Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted that having several codes that do not belong to any themes might be a part of the process. In this case, the researcher can assign these codes to the "miscellaneous" theme.
4. The next step was reviewing the generated themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that the researchers should divide this phase into two levels. First, I re-read all codes under each theme and confirmed that the codes within the same theme had patterns. If I discovered no pattern, I reviewed the theme. While some themes might be perfectly created, others might need adjustments, such as splitting the theme into two or combining two separate themes into one (Braun & Clarke, 2006). If I found the patterns, I moved to the second level, which was a validation of the individual themes relating to the entire data set.

5. Once I reviewed the themes, I defined and clarified them. It is essential to keep the theme consistent, avoiding it being too complex (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I analyzed how each theme fitted the overall "story" based on the possessed data. I structured the themes and, if necessary, identified the sub-themes.
6. In the final phase, I produced a report based on the analyzed themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested that a report should be more than just a data summary. It should be concise, logical, coherent, non-repetitive, and interesting. I extracted the report as an analytical narrative.

Reliability and validity

Reliability

Quality assessment in quantitative research differs from that in qualitative research. Leung (2015) concluded that there is no consensus on assessing the qualitative project as many different approaches exist. While in quantitative studies, researchers focus on validity, reliability, and generalizability, researchers can apply credibility, dependability, and transferability instead in qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Walby, 2015). For example, researchers can use activities such as continuous observation or data collection triangulation to check the project's credibility. The process of member checking when the results of the interview are returned to participants for confirmation is another way to address credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Many authors raise the importance of the trustworthiness of qualitative studies compared to quantitative ones. For example, Stahl and King (2020) indicated that the

researchers do not look for replicability in qualitative studies. Different respondents can generate unique responses despite the similar scenarios of the questions.

Dependability is a crucial element that demonstrates replicability and repeatability. Janis (2022) defined dependability as consistency. To maintain trustworthiness, the researcher must be sure that the collected data is consistent and can be replicated (Ul Haq Kakar et al., 2023). Ahmed (2024) stated that the researcher can achieve dependability through rigorous documentation and an audit trail.

I used an audit trail to improve dependability. I provided a transparent description of each step I take during the research process. As a part of the audit trail, the researcher systematically logs and documents procedures and decisions of the research process, which allows readers to understand the research steps, permits the reproduction of the project and guarantees dependability (Ahmed, 2024; Eryilmaz, 2022). To follow the audit trail process, I used reflexive journals to track the research process.

Validity

Credibility

One of the elements that can check the trustworthiness of the project is credibility. In a qualitative project, researchers believe there is no universal truth and that the world might have a variety of elements and opinions (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 1999). The researcher is the main research instrument, and the minimum requirement for the project made by this researcher is transparency and clarity (Dodgson, 2019). Transparency is the key to trustworthiness in qualitative studies with an apparent epistemological and theoretical base. The entire establishment is in question if there is a lack of

trustworthiness in the work (Adler, 2022). The concept of credibility in qualitative research is similar to internal validity in quantitative studies (Connelly, 2016). Constantinou et al. (2017) stated that credibility demonstrates the extent to which the research results reflect reality. While credibility is just one of the elements to reach validity, choosing the appropriate way to support it is essential.

To support the credibility of my work, I used a member checking approach. Member checking is the process of requesting feedback about the data from the participant (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Motulsky, 2021). The researcher shares collected data and interpretations with conclusions with the group of participants once in a process or multiple times to create a continuous feedback loop. Using this method, the researcher increases the credibility and trustworthiness of the project (Chang, 2014) as well as its accuracy and transferability (Brear, 2019). Researchers usually conduct member checking through follow-up interviews and focus groups or collect it through written comments.

Less commonly, researchers may use visual presentations or workshops (Brear, 2019). While many scholars call member checking a golden standard, researchers still face several challenges while doing it. For example, it needs to be clarified what data is specifically given to whom (Motulsky, 2021). J. M. Morse (2015) considered member checking approach not practical, questioning the rationale of providing another attempt for participants to change their minds and stating that it is not required in any other type of research. According to her, the researcher's expertise outranks the participant's analysis judgement. Despite the contradictiveness of this approach, I implemented

member checking and allowed participants to assess my interpretation of the interview. I followed up with the participants through written comments.

Transferability

Transferability is another essential validity element. For any researcher, it is crucial to maintain the quality and relevance for current and future readers. While the research process might focus on a group of participants, the research results should have a broader application. Connelly (2016) defined transferability as the degree to which findings can be useful for a person in different settings. While it might seem similar to the generalization in quantitative research, transferability is not the same as statistical generalization. Munthe-Kaas et al. (2020) stated that, based on the previously identified characteristics, the degree of the research question and the degree of data used for the findings review might differ, and this is what the researcher should consider as transferability. The intention of the researcher to support the transferability with a detailed context, location, and participants' description is essential (Connelly, 2016). I described the participants, the research process, and further analysis to demonstrate transferability. I also supported transferability by using a member checking method.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a crucial aspect of qualitative research. Tuval-Mashiach (2021) defined confirmability as the degree to which others can confirm the research findings. It is essential to build a conclusion based on the expertise of the participants rather than the researcher. As a person with years of experience in marketing, I needed to avoid bias when analyzing the interview results. Connelly (2016) explained confirmability as the

degree of the consistency of findings and their ability to be repeated. The researcher should maintain the audit of the analysis of results and let the other researchers, for example, during peer-debriefing sessions, review them to demonstrate the confirmability and lack of bias. Another method to check confirmability is member checking, which verifies credibility by repeatedly checking participants' findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). During the research, besides member checking, I also used reflexive journals to track the research process and analyze crucial elements of the research through an internal dialogue. B. A. Smith (1999) noted that reflexive journals may reveal previously hidden contexts. With my own analysis of the findings and repeated checking with the participants, I achieved confirmability to maintain the project at a high-quality level.

Data Saturation

It is essential for the researcher to obtain data saturation in their project. Data saturation is a point in collection and analysis when the researcher cannot get new information or does not answer the research question with the newly obtained information. (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024). The main purpose of data saturation is to reach a qualified sample size. I used interview protocol (See Appendix B) and stopped interviewing new participants when I was confident that no new themes or codes arose and until I heard repetitions in participants' answers.

Transition and Summary

In Section 3, I assessed the role of the researcher. I also explained the details of the project ethics and described the role of the Walden University Institutional Review

Board (IRB) and the importance of applying the Belmont Report to the project. I used the qualitative research method and descriptive research design in my project. In Section 3, I also provided details about the population and sampling I used in my research. I explained the approach I used to collect data, which was semistructured interviews. For this purpose, I used an interview protocol (See Appendix B). I described how I analyzed the collected data and how securely I would store it. At the end of the section, I clarified how to maintain the research's reliability and validity.

In Section 4, I will discuss the results of the interviews and analyze the collected data. I will recognize the themes and align the elements of the collected answers accordingly. I will explore how the selected conceptual framework is reflected in the results. I will find and explain the limitations of the research and discuss future research opportunities. In conclusion, I will explain the practical implications of the research and summarize how small business leaders can use marketing strategies to increase sales in online shopping.

Section 4: Findings and Conclusions

Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative pragmatic inquiry project is to understand the online shopping marketing strategies that some small business marketing leaders use to increase demand for products and services. The data for this research were collected with the help of semistructured interviews. I interviewed six participants from three different cities: Vancouver, BC (Canada); Seattle, WA (USA); and Toronto, ON (Canada). Initially, the research plan involved interviewing 12 participants from three cities – Vancouver, BC; Seattle, WA; and Toronto, ON. However, data collection concluded after conducting interviews with six small business leaders as data saturation appeared at participant four. I conducted two additional interviews to ensure data saturation continued to show repetition. All participants are essential to the company and run or manage marketing activities. I maintain the anonymity of the participants and applied identification codes to each of them, where P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. I analyzed interview transcriptions and notes using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis process. For each interview, I used six questions divided into the following categories: strategies, challenges, how to overcome them, and metrics for success.

This project's research question is: What online marketing strategies do leaders use to increase demand for products and services? While conducting the semistructured interviews to answer this question, the interview questions were divided into several categories: (a) online marketing strategies to increase sales of the products/services; (b) main challenges; (c) overcoming challenges; (d) success metrics.

The primary findings from this project were that small business leaders use a similar set of marketing strategies to increase demand for their products and services, although the implementation methods may vary. Small business leaders focus on both paid and non-paid marketing, employ personalization to target specific audiences, build trust to attract and retain clients, and consistently test new approaches while adhering to goal-setting practices. However, small business leaders face a range of challenges that may hinder the effective execution of these strategies.

As a first step of the thematic analysis, I familiarized myself with the collected data by reading the transcripts and the interpretation notes, which were used for members' checking. In the second step, after analyzing the collected data, I identified the keywords, which I later gathered in 110 interpretive codes. I then merged some of the codes due to their extreme similarity. After thoroughly examining the codes, following steps three, four and five of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), four themes with nine sub-themes emerged, and 17 codes remained unassigned.

Theme 1: Focusing on Marketing Channels Strategies

The primary and most prominent theme is titled Focusing on Marketing Channels Strategies. Across all interviews, participants consistently emphasized their engagement with various marketing channels. Although each small business owner referenced different specific channels, the presence of such a focus was universal. Initially, I identified two distinct themes; however, upon further analysis, they were retained as sub-themes and incorporated into Theme 1.

Sub-Theme 1: Focusing on Paid Marketing Efforts

The importance and popularity of paid marketing are hard to deny. Digital marketing is becoming increasingly affordable, creating additional opportunities for small businesses – a sector that often faces resource constraints. Vargas et al. (2025) noted that paid media are customizable, targeted, and interactive. Advertising influences consumer beliefs and attitudes, which in turn impact a company's value (Spotts et al., 2022). Consequently, business owners view paid marketing as an affordable component of marketing strategies and as impactful and essential.

Each of the participants demonstrated an interest in paid marketing. This sub-theme contained the highest number of codes among all sub-themes, seventeen. Participants mentioned various paid strategies, including influencer marketing, search and Meta ads, and purchasing leads from aggregators. For example, P2, when discussing their marketing strategy, stated: "Online advertising on Google, Facebook, I mean Meta, meaning Instagram and LinkedIn… we also recently started using Reddit as an online advertising channel…" P4 commented: "We have really been focused on Google AdWords." P5 expressed a similar view, stating: "I have used direct search advertisement with Google and Bing… someone searches for a particular keyword."

Despite the benefits of this strategy, this sub-theme also encompasses the most challenges shared by participants. Although barriers to strategic implementation are addressed in a separate theme, it is important to outline the specific challenges related to paid media. One of the most significant concerns for small business owners is the cost associated with marketing campaigns. Participants referred to various cost-related metrics

such as cost per sale, cost per acquisition, and return on investment, and highlighted their variability depending on seasonality. For example, P5 stated: “The number one challenge is the cost of these advertisements… they all charge pretty stiff fees.”

Sub-Theme 2: Focusing on Non-Paid Marketing Efforts

While paid marketing efforts are clearly a leading strategy, another sub-theme that every participant mentioned is a focus on non-paid marketing efforts, which includes owned social media. This is defined as the content that is created and shared through the company’s social assets or networks and is also considered a crucial brand communication element (Irawan & Cheng, 2025). Brand communication is essential for small businesses that are building their brand from the ground up.

As evidenced by the challenges associated with paid marketing, the primary concerns within this strategy include the high cost of advertising and the return on investment. Since the interview questions did not explicitly request participants to explain the rationale behind each strategy, only some participants provided such explanations. For example, P2 noted that “Ads are immediate results” but “the most expensive way of doing this,” whereas “the other strategies are basically lower cost” and contribute to “the optimization between cost and time of the effect.” P2 also referred to content as another non-paid marketing strategy. Similarly, P3 highlighted Google My Business as a “way we get most of the traffic, and we pay the most attention there.” Google My Business, recently renamed Google Business Profile, is a free tool that helps businesses remain visible on Google Search and Google Maps.

Three out of six participants mentioned content as one of their strategies. P2 even described content as a long-term strategy, referring to “blog articles, thought leadership stuff, new ideas, LinkedIn posts” because they are “very effective in the longer term” and “create brand awareness.” P4 referred to their content strategy as “thought leadership” and defined it as an educational approach that avoids a sales pitch: “we are aiming to really push this so that it really allows people to feel comfortable, that this is the information that we are sharing with them.”

Other non-paid strategies that the participants mentioned during the interviews were Facebook Marketplace, search engine optimization, partnership marketing, owning Facebook groups, and website live chat.

Theme 2: Personalized and Trust-Oriented Customer Engagement Strategies

While small business owners emphasize paid and non-paid marketing strategies, they collectively acknowledge the essential role of trust and personalization as critical to success, particularly in light of potential changes in consumer behavior that may affect the effectiveness of these strategies. Nurlatifah et al. (2025) identified that companies can cultivate trust by disseminating positive and trustworthy content, such as that shared on social media platforms. Simultaneously, this approach may influence consumers’ purchase intentions. During the interviews, I noticed this theme across all the conducted interviews. As with Theme 1, initially, I identified two distinct themes; however, upon further analysis, they were retained as sub-themes and incorporated into Theme 2.

Sub-Theme 1: Personalization and Targeting

Some small business leaders viewed the customization of messages and approaches as a distinct strategy. I identified codes related to this sub-theme across half of the participants. Business owners should develop a thorough understanding of their customers to enable precise targeting, which facilitates the timely delivery of value propositions and contributes to more efficient use of the marketing budget by reducing waste. Notably, the development of a customer persona should precede the implementation of a marketing campaign. Customization may also enhance purchase intentions, particularly when mediated by consumer trust (Zuliawati Zed & Sellina, 2025). Participants highlighted the significance of this strategy in various forms.

In the interview, P2 discussed the continuous and ongoing optimization of all marketing campaigns, including the adjustment of keywords and updates to the target audience. This business leader also emphasized the importance of cold outreach as a strategy that requires personalization. One of the marketing strategies employed by this participant is the use of Facebook and Meta ads, where customization and targeting are particularly critical: “For example, one of the things we can do or we do is that for in Facebook, instead of just advertising to the masses, we identify which groups or sort of interests are matching the user, our potential personas. Furthermore, we basically target those Facebook groups. So, it is a smaller group of people with a more effective outcome for us.”

P5 described a similar strategy of customizing keywords based on the target audience and continuously refining audience segmentation to improve advertising

outcomes. Concurrently, this business leader highlighted the importance of understanding the customer: “I think there is a couple of things that should be noted. One is really understanding your customer avatar so you can target them effectively across various channels.” Understanding customer behavior may help to predict churn or customer loss as customers often adjust their behavior in response to the situation and over time (Priyanka et al., 2024). While prediction might have false results, the ability to understand behavior can still potentially increase chances to retain current customers and obtain new ones.

Finally, P6 noted that they sought assistance from external consultants, one of whose actions involved profiling customers: “They [consultants] tried to become closer to the consumer behavior profile… If they could create a profile for each segment, they understood which segment we are mainly focusing in.” Segmentation is an essential stage in marketing strategy development. Business leaders use customer segmentation to align product lines with specific segments, identify client bases, and tailor the company’s marketing plans. Appropriate segmentation also adds customization and facilitates the implementation of targeted marketing strategies (Ashraf et al., 2025). While segmentation can be completed in-house when sufficient data are available, the use of external consultants may be an option, particularly when data are limited or unavailable.

Sub-Theme 2: Building Trust

All participants identified trust as a key element that business leaders should prioritize. A long-term business–consumer relationship cannot be established without a proper level of trust. Yang et al. (2025) stated that customers’ perceptions of digital value

may influence omnichannel brand trust. Trust is considered an essential component of a marketing strategy and a fundamental element of social exchange theory (Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2023). Hence, the exchange, which, in business, can be defined as the exchange of money in return for a product or positive feedback in return for high-quality products or services, may not occur without a sufficient degree of trust.

During the interview, P1 mentioned, for instance, certification of the product to ensure that customers are satisfied and buying products according to the standards. P1 also referred to the reputation of influencers who may play an essential role in marketing channels: “Influencers can get tagged somewhere, and they did something that is not right,” which can lead to “a negative effect on your product.” There are numerous examples within the industry where influencers may begin to negatively affect a brand’s reputation if their own reputation is compromised due to adverse circumstances.

P3 was one of the strongest advocates for building trust through customer reviews. When customers decide to purchase a product or service or book an appointment online, “they go to see how many reviews you have. Like when you choose the restaurant, you want to say, oh, how many reviews they have!” P3 emphasized the significance of reviews: “It creates more trust because they (customers) read the reviews.” This business owner also highlighted the importance placed on website testimonials: “We have more than 6,000 reviews. And it is going to mention, that’s how much we have. This is the rating, so that creates trust.” An interesting addition to the reviews and testimonials strategy, which P3 considers one of the most important, is the role of keywords within the reviews: the company’s employees intentionally structure

their communication with customers to encourage the inclusion of specific keywords that customers may later use in their reviews.

To maintain customers' trust, small businesses should rely on referrals and recommendations. P4 emphasized the importance of building a brand through reputation: "When new people come look for us, they are seeing these reviews and… one of the things we are extremely proud of is that if you think about how easy it is to provide a review. Nowadays, we have absolutely zero negative reviews." The company's marketing team focuses on this aspect of branding, as "that brand then turns into sales down the road as well."

Trust is derived from reviews, testimonials, referrals, and from the narratives shared by past customers with prospective ones. P5 and P6 mentioned the case studies that their marketing teams use to increase online sales. This approach may be associated with emotional marketing, which is defined as a consumer purchase decision-making process influenced by rational considerations and emotional responses (Tan, 2024). When listening to or watching video stories, prospective customers may increase their trust in the brand and, as a result, be more lenient in purchasing a product or service. For example, P5 stated that they "would often use a third-party case presented in a video format… highlighted the benefits…" P6 directly addressed the format of stories: "The whole idea is to share the story of somebody using these systems… easier for them (prospective customers) to imagine."

Theme 3: Goal-Oriented Innovation Strategies

Small business leaders demonstrated a strong interest in innovations that come along with accentuating the importance of goal-setting strategies. Setting goals is essential for any company, not only for small businesses. Long-term goals can help an organization develop a coherent strategy with a clear direction. As strategies often need to be flexible and responsive to a changing environment, innovation becomes an important and significant tool for guiding the company toward its established goals in alignment with the chosen strategy. During the interviews, five participants stressed clear and long-term goals as a required strategic element, while all six participants constantly integrated new tools or approaches as a part of their strategic intentions.

Sub-Theme 1: Setting Goals

Small business leaders demonstrated a strong interest in innovation, alongside emphasizing the importance of goal-setting strategies. Five participants identified clear and long-term goals as a necessary strategic component, while all six participants consistently integrated new tools or approaches as part of their strategic intentions. Given that only 5% of businesses reach their annual goals, goal-setting challenges may extend beyond the company or its leadership and may lie in how goals are established (PR Newswire US, 2021). Therefore, the significance of goal-setting as a strategy is difficult to overstate.

Some interview participants discussed specific goal-setting, such as P1, who mentioned they “have a vision of taking the business to a million dollars in revenue in a span of the next 5 years.” Others emphasized the general importance of having goals. For

instance, P2 stated that “the end goal should be well clear for you when you are doing any type of online marketing because that illusion of success is sometimes a very big problem.” At the same time, P4 addressed the importance of detail and prioritization within goal-setting. For example, the participant emphasized that sales are not the sole focus, stating that the company “also have to build the brand.” Maintaining focus on what truly matters was another point highlighted by P4. The participant repeatedly noted that one of the most challenging aspects and greatest priorities is to “really move the needle.”

The vast majority of participants underscored the significance of long-term goals and goal-setting. P6 discussed the challenges associated with balancing long-term and short-term goal setting: “We are looking for the sweet, close, easier deal versus those ones which need a lot of time lead time to become a deal.” This participant noted that business leaders might focus “on an easy, accessible, possible way to get a new deal rather than investing properly and creating a proper infrastructure.” P6’s reflections illustrate that, although decision-makers may recognize the importance of long-term goals, they may still pursue smaller, quicker wins.

Sub-Theme 2: Consistently Testing New Approaches

In an era marked by rapid and continuous technological advancement, businesses may face significant risks if their leaders fail to keep pace with competitors. The case of Blockbuster, once a dominant player in the video rental industry, falling behind Netflix – a newer and more adaptable competitor at the time – illustrates the critical importance of innovation and the potential consequences of neglecting to respond to technological and market shifts (Dalton & Logan, 2024). However, not all small businesses have equal

access to new technologies, which may result in disparities and place small enterprises at a disadvantage compared to larger corporations. This sub-theme emerged as the second most prevalent, following the focus on paid marketing efforts, and included fifteen codes.

All six participants demonstrated a consistent pattern of considering experimentation and the testing of new approaches as potential strategies to increase online sales. P1, for instance, described a product line innovation strategy, which in their case involves product diversification. Customers tend to purchase a specific type of product from their business, and the company's goal is to diversify its offerings while maintaining profit margins. Additionally, the company tests packaging modifications by incorporating festive designs to highlight product benefits and enhance product appeal.

P2 did not address product diversification; however, they discussed channel diversification: "Finding new channels or more relevant channels is going to help you decrease the costs of the advertising." Surprisingly, P2 was the only participant who mentioned the integration of artificial intelligence as part of their experimental strategy. The company's marketing team utilized an artificial intelligence tool (GPT) to enhance their content strategy: "It is becoming more and more easy right now because of the GPTs and we are using them. For example, we want to repost an existing post. We can basically ask GPT to rewrite that for us." Simultaneously, P2 identified content fatigue – specifically, a lack of new ideas – as a challenge within this strategy: "After 6 months or a year, you are out of ideas usually… we usually reuse our content or rewrite the same stuff." The difficulty in maintaining fresh content may help explain the rationale behind the application of artificial intelligence in their content development efforts.

P4 employs a strategy similar to that of P2, continuously testing various platforms to identify those that offer the best return on advertising spend: “We have dipped our toes in the water with some LinkedIn ads… trying to be very frugal…” They also engage in channel diversification: “We have a large breadth of articles and things that we are working on and are writing, and those are shared on social media. They are shared on our blogs. They are shared across the boards every Monday we release… a new blog.” Channel diversification may assist in better understanding how to reach the targeted audience by engaging them from different angles and identifying the most effective channel for delivering the value proposition.

Experimentation through channel diversification is also a strategy employed by P5. The business owner said they “consistently experiment across marketing channels to see if strategy starts performing.” They apply a budget-driven, data-informed approach by testing various channels and reallocating budgets based on seasonality and external cycles, such as political events: “We uncovered that in that time frame the political campaigns ramped up their spending on Facebook and therefore that… pushed up the cost… At that point we had to deprioritize Facebook and focus more on other ad channels.” P5 emphasized that continual experimentation is a necessary strategy, given the instability of marketing channels and the influence of unpredictable external factors.

Theme 4: Navigating Barriers to Strategic Implementation

During the interviews, all participants identified at least one challenge that hindered successful planning and strategy integration. A total of twenty-one codes were initially assigned to this theme. However, upon further analysis, I divided this theme into

three sub-themes. While certain challenges were discussed within other themes due to their relevance, many remained non-specific and could potentially be aligned with multiple themes. Challenges may often prevent business leaders, who already face various operational, funding, and other difficulties, from consistently initiating or sustaining marketing strategies due to the increased complexity of managing a small business. That is why it was essential to combine the related codes into the separate theme.

Sub-Theme 1: Industry Conditions

Three out of six participants raised concerns regarding the impact of industry-related factors on their strategies. The industry is considered an external factor, meaning the company cannot directly influence it, as it originates outside the organization's control. Nevertheless, industry dynamics affect all businesses operating under similar competitive conditions. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic slowdown – cited by P1 – impacted not only P1's business but also numerous others within the same industry. Therefore, while this sub-theme was retained in the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that this barrier extends beyond the confines of an individual company.

The market and industry can become oversaturated when numerous similar players enter, resulting in oligopolistic or pure competition conditions. P1 identified market oversaturation as a challenge that hinders the development of a unique content marketing strategy: "Overall like in terms of content…. There is so much noise out there in the market." P5 referred to another industry-related barrier affecting the advancement

of marketing strategies – competitors entering search ads marketing without prior bidding experience, which may lead to inflated pricing for specific keywords. Both market oversaturation and inexperienced competitors can unintentionally impact the marketing strategies of small businesses.

Finally, two participants identified industry uncertainty as another barrier to strategic implementation. While P1 expressed concern regarding general industry uncertainty – "You never know if that is going to pan out, it is a hidden trial in a lot of cases." – P6 attributed the uncertainty to the complexity of their specific product: "One of the problems that we have in particular in our industry is it is a very unknown product… You will end up with clients who do not know what they want from our product range." This particular factor may present barriers, but it can also create opportunities to explore alternative strategies, such as those noted by this participant – specifically, the use of case studies to help prospective customers understand the product and its applications.

Sub-Theme 2: Internal Misalignments

Notably, many barriers originate within the company and are not related to external factors or resource limitations. Internal communication issues emerged as a barrier to the successful implementation of marketing strategies in conversations with four participants. While internal misalignments are factors that can be managed and resolved by the company's employees and leadership, such issues often stem from management itself. In such cases, these challenges may be difficult to address if the management does not acknowledge the existence of the problem.

P4 is one of two participants who acknowledged that, while ideas may originate from management, employees often agree with them primarily due to the participant's managerial title: "A lot of the times because of my title… people just be like, oh, (P4 name) wants that. Let us do this…" Simultaneously, P4 recognized that this dynamic is not always beneficial: "and it may not be the best thing for the business at that time." Similarly, P6 admitted that overreliance on management can hinder the implementation of strategies: "I am the person in charge as the principal to respond… I might be too much restricted about that, and I am thinking about adopting delegating more to the team." An excessive focus on managerial centrality in decision-making processes – particularly regarding micro-operations – can impede or delay the implementation of future strategies. However, when a leader is aware of the potential consequences and demonstrates a willingness to address the issue, it can facilitate the effective and timely adoption of new strategies.

Sub-Theme 3: Resources Constraint

Small business owners should have sufficient resources to ensure planned marketing strategies' smooth and efficient implementation. Five out of six participants expressed concerns about the availability and affordability of access to necessary resources. Although the data were insufficient to assess the full significance of this barrier, the frequency of codes associated with this sub-theme suggests that it warrants attention from small business owners, their partners, and potentially government entities, who may use this concern to support small businesses.

Budget constraints emerged as the most frequently cited resource-related challenge, with two participants addressing it directly and two referencing it indirectly. P1 discussed budget challenges in working with co-founders, noting the difficulty in reaching consensus. Although this initially appeared to be a communication issue, how P1 described the situation led to its interpretation as a financial constraint – an interpretation later confirmed through member-checking. P2 referred to the acquisition cost as a challenge (discussed in Theme 1, Sub-Theme 1) and subsequently explained how larger budgets can address such issues: "The best way is basically to you either have more money to spend more. That is how you overcome with a bigger budget." P4 explicitly stated the need for increased budget: "We bootstrap everything… trying to figure out where to get that money." Similarly, P6, along with P1, mentioned the high cost of marketing tools and platform fees as significant challenges for small businesses.

Time is another resource that participants identified as a potential barrier to the planning and implementation of marketing strategies. Three participants mentioned this challenge directly, while one addressed it indirectly. P2 explicitly stated that managing marketing strategies can become a full-time responsibility: "You need to keep monitoring them (advertising), updating the keywords, updating the audiences and stuff like that. So that is challenging… The more money you spend on ads, the more full-time job it becomes." P3 highlighted the relationship between time investment and success: "If I put 100 hours into something, it is going to be better than 95% of the people in that skill because most people do not even put one hour into something." Although P3 did not explicitly label time as a challenge, they confirmed during member-checking that time is

a critical factor requiring attention. P4 addressed the time constraint in terms of prioritization: “There are only so many hours in the day… so we have to figure out what is going to bring the highest rate of priority.” Lastly, P6 indirectly referred to time as a constraint when discussing the challenge of managing incoming leads: “I feel I am not prepared to answer too many leads… I have to spend time…” Small business owners may address time-related challenges through a comprehensive approach that involves optimizing other resources and improving current operational processes.

Small business leaders clearly recognize the significance of resources and the importance of their appropriate acquisition and utilization. Financial resources are essential for socioeconomic growth, as they stimulate investments that businesses can allocate toward employment and education, thereby contributing to the broader restructuring of the economy (Hung et al., 2024). While time may initially be perceived as a resource that can be easily adjusted without requiring additional financial investment, financial resources can directly influence time availability. Small business leaders may need to modify their operations and delegation processes to address time constraints effectively.

Relevance of Findings to Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was Homans’s social exchange theory (Homans, 1958). Social behavior involves exchanging of both material and non-material goods, wherein each action carries a cost and the potential for distributed rewards. Individuals are assumed to maximize their rewards while minimizing their efforts (costs). The findings indicated that the emerging themes are aligned with the conceptual framework.

For example, business leaders anticipate higher outcomes while aiming to decrease expenses associated with marketing campaigns. They also focus on non-paid marketing efforts, indicating that the maximization of rewards is preferred while keeping costs as low as possible, ideally zero. Business leaders implement new technologies to optimize their efforts while enhancing outcomes. They attract new customers and retain existing ones through trust, which reflects alignment with the theory from the clients' perspective. As trust increases, customers may be more likely to progress to subsequent stages and complete a purchase.

Small business leaders express concerns about the efforts and resources invested in integrated marketing strategies. While marketing expenses generate value for businesses by strengthening customer commitment and bringing future returns from business–customer relationships (Calder et al., 2024), small business leaders still consider these costs a significant challenge. Most operate with limited resources, such as budget and time; however, they maintain positive expectations regarding the outcomes of current or planned marketing campaigns. Many participants referenced the cost of specific marketing actions, such as cost per click, cost per sale, and cost of acquisition, as part of their paid marketing efforts.

For instance, P1 noted the need to "put a little bit less cost per click" during certain times of the year but acknowledged that costs had to be increased during seasonal peaks. This cost optimization is driven by the potential for reward, which can ultimately be measured by the number of online sales. When discussing their strategies, all participants expressed high or near-high expectations despite facing challenges in

allocating additional resources. In other words, small business leaders aim to minimize the costs associated with marketing strategies while planning to maximize the rewards resulting from their implementation.

While focusing on non-paid marketing strategies, business leaders demonstrated engagement with customers and communities by posting educational content, which aligns with the findings of other studies. Hou and Zhang (2021) described social support as a factor that may develop strong emotional ties and extend psychological ownership. However, some factors identified by other authors were not directly reflected in participants' responses regarding paid and non-paid marketing efforts. For example, Rezaei et al. (2016) stated that social media plays a pivotal role in the purchase decision-making process, yet while participants in this project mentioned social media, they did not present it as a priority strategy.

Small business leaders consistently test new technologies to improve their strategies' outcomes and reduce the risk of failure, as well as the excessive expenditure of budgets and time. Busalim et al. (2021) noted that technological and motivational factors shape customer engagement behavior on social commerce platforms. During the interview, P2 stated: "we have to have different content… that is also difficult. It is becoming more and more easy right now because of the GPTs, and we are using them." This example illustrates how small business leaders seek to optimize processes to reduce effort while maintaining or improving outcomes. P5 emphasized the essential role of "having a full quiver of various marketing panel that will allow you to pivot from one channel as it becomes less effective, less cost-effective, towards other marketing

channels." P6 explained that they increase their costs by making additional investments in their website, as they need to educate clients "who does not know what they want from our product range" before proceeding with the sales process. This example illustrates the application of social exchange theory, as the business increases its efforts (costs) with the expectation of a future reward, namely, an educated client who is more likely to complete a purchase.

Some authors have discussed the motivation of business leaders to engage in digital marketing activities. Ritz et al. (2019) concluded that small business owners are motivated to participate directly in digital marketing activities. However, during the interviews, most participants identified challenges such as internal misalignments, and time and budget constraints. In addition, P6, for example, mentioned over-reliance on the founder. Setkute and Dibb (2022) identified a similar challenge in small businesses: even when companies have marketing managers, these individuals do not always hold decision-making power, as the business owner typically makes most of the key decisions. Similarly, a lack of empowerment and reliance on the leader's final decision emerged as challenges faced by the participants in this project. Cromhout and Duffett (2022) noted that small business owners may lack the skills and knowledge necessary for active participation in digital marketing activities. They also face financial limitations and management difficulties.

Small business leaders adopt customer-centric strategies, such as personalized and trust-oriented engagement approaches, to enhance consumer trust. Nasrolahi Vosta and Jalilvand (2023) identified trust as an essential element of social exchange theory, while

Ahmad et al. (2023) emphasized its role as a critical tool for the development of relationships. While the previous examples demonstrated the application of social exchange theory from the business perspective, this example illustrates its application from the client's perspective. Zhou et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of interactions among three groups: vendors, recommenders, and consumers. Communication between online vendors, recommenders, and customers positively influences trust, which in turn increases purchase intentions. Customers are also more likely to provide the personal information required for an online purchase later in the decision-making process, as trust increases over time (Aiello et al., 2020). P2 emphasized the importance of consistency in marketing campaigns: "When they (customers) come to our platform, they need to see what you have advertised to them… If they do not see it, you have lost the whole success of the previous steps of the funnel… It is very important that if you are running campaigns the campaign should match with what the user sees." P3 also underscored the role of reviews and testimonials in the purchasing process: "it (having reviews and Google score) creates more trust because they (customers) read the reviews and their pictures and reviews." As this research focuses on the strategies of small business leaders, the consumer perspective was not examined in depth; however, it presents a promising avenue for future research.

Business Contributions and Recommendations for Professional Practice

While small business leaders may perceive marketing strategy development as a relatively straightforward task, building and managing effective strategies that yield

positive results and deliver the expected return on investment often requires a complex and thorough approach.

The findings of this project identified the marketing strategies employed by small business leaders to increase online sales. Paid marketing efforts emerged as the most frequently used strategy, likely due to their perceived speed and targeting precision. Overall, participants recognized digital marketing, particularly search advertising, as the primary direction for their promotional activities. However, many participants reported challenges related to advertising costs and the return on investment within paid efforts.

To address these challenges, business leaders frequently rely on non-paid marketing strategies. These strategies encompass both online and offline activities, with a predominant focus on online channels due to their flexibility. The emphasis was placed on promotional assets categorized as owned media, such as company websites and social media platforms. These findings align with the work of Luzhnova and Fedorov (2022), who identified content, engagement, and traffic as the three primary pillars of Internet use by small businesses. The results also reflect small business leaders' awareness of the influence of social media activities on user intentions, as previously discussed by Jamil et al. (2022). Owned media may be challenging to establish initially; however, over time, it can begin to work in favor of the business rather than requiring continuous active input.

Educational content delivered through websites and social media may serve as an initial step in the customer's purchase decision-making process. Without adequate knowledge about a product or service, potential customers may experience confusion, disregard the offering, and fail to make the final purchase decision. Therefore, small

business leaders must assess the existing level of customer knowledge about their industry and offerings. If customers engage in an information search as part of their decision-making process, the business must position itself as a reliable and comprehensive source of information.

Personalization and trust are essential in building and maintaining customer–vendor relationships. Personalization catalyzes customer loyalty and is particularly critical in an era of increased customer expectations (Chougala, 2024). The findings of this project demonstrated that personalization and trust are important to customers and are recognized by small business leaders as deliberate strategic tools. Small business marketing should begin by narrowing down the target audience and developing a deep understanding of customer needs and preferences. This understanding is crucial to ensure that the message conveying the value of a product or service is directed to the appropriate audience and delivered effectively. Without sufficient knowledge of the target audience, marketing efforts are unlikely to be accurately or efficiently executed.

As a fundamental element of social exchange theory (Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2023), trust plays a vital role in customer–vendor relationships. Small business leaders can build trust through various approaches, including trust-based marketing strategies such as leveraging reviews and testimonials, maintaining the reputation of partners, including influencers, and using video case studies that highlight the experiences of local clients. Sales do not conclude at the moment the customer receives the product or service. A business' post-purchase behavior may significantly influence

future relationships' trustworthiness. This makes post-sale engagement another critical strategy that small business leaders should consider.

Goal-setting is an essential component of any marketing or business plan. Small business leaders emphasized the importance of establishing clear, specific, and long-term goals. Although the prioritization of short-term objectives over long-term ones may create challenges, maintaining a long-term focus is critical. The direction provided by long-term goals can support early-stage planning, thereby reducing the risk of failure.

The findings of this project also indicate that many small business leaders prefer experimenting with new tools, platforms, channels, and even products. Small businesses should support continuous improvement through consistent experimentation, such as testing emerging channels and platforms. Given the constantly evolving conditions in which small businesses operate, this strategy may support the development of a sustainable competitive advantage. Although the project did not reveal widespread use of artificial intelligence among participants, one business leader reported utilizing artificial intelligence to address content fatigue – a challenge characterized by a lack of new ideas. The potential increase in artificial intelligence adoption for small business marketing strategies may be a promising area for future research. Additionally, the diversification and rotation of marketing channels based on internal and external conditions constitute an essential aspect of this strategy, as they help prevent stagnation and reduce budget inefficiencies if a particular channel ceases to be effective.

While the structure of small businesses is less complex than that of large corporations and may appear easier to manage internally, this project indicates that the

level of internal misalignments, including communication concerns, is relatively high in the small business environment. Small business leaders should give particular attention to internal disagreements, including conflicts between partners, leadership distraction, and over-reliance on founders. Delegation challenges are often prevalent, as founders typically launch the business within a small team, making it difficult to recognize and accept the need for growth and the corresponding release of responsibilities to newly hired personnel. An additional important recommendation is to enhance trust in employees, which can facilitate a smoother transition during the delegation process and reduce potential obstacles. These tactics may assist in removing obstacles to successfully integrating marketing strategies.

Resource deficits are a common challenge faced by small businesses. Many begin with bootstrapping, relying on personal savings, or with credit lines and loans that require immediate interest payments, often compounding existing financial strain. Additionally, access to non-financial resources varies by region, further contributing to the issue. Resource constraints represent a critical area that small business leaders should address. According to the findings of this project, the most frequently cited concerns are budget and time.

Small business leaders should explore financial opportunities beyond direct funding and include cost-saving measures. For instance, some government programs provide free consultations, which may help business owners save time and resources in resolving specific issues. Another recommended approach to conserving time, which can

then be redirected toward creating and managing marketing strategies, is the delegation of responsibilities and tasks.

Implications for Social Change

Misalignment between vendors' and consumers' expectations can result in market imbalance and contribute to a trust-deficient environment. The consequences of such an imbalance may include, but are not limited to, the following: (a) resource waste: inefficient allocation of the company's resources may lead to budget deficits and potential personnel layoffs, (b) loss of trust: consumer dissatisfaction may arise due to unmet needs, potentially causing stress associated with the purchasing experience; (c) frequent product returns: increased return rates can contribute to environmental strain due to additional logistical demands.

The implications for social change involve encouraging business leaders to develop products that better align with consumer needs, promoting stress-free purchasing decisions and strengthening consumer trust in vendors. The purchase decision-making process may be lengthy and time-consuming, involving multiple steps. Consumer stress levels can increase throughout this process, particularly when the products or services are complex (e.g., health-related products). Trust levels may also rise during the later stages of the decision-making journey (Aiello et al., 2020). Implementing marketing strategies that are well aligned with consumers' expectations – including the value embedded in the marketing message, the channels through which the message is delivered, and the final value of the product that fulfills initial consumer expectations and closes the need gap – can support a more effective and satisfying purchasing experience. As trust is a

fundamental element of social exchange theory (Nasrolahi Vosta & Jalilvand, 2023), and relationship development through trust is one of the theory's core pillars (Ahmad et al., 2023), the implications for social change are also aligned with the theoretical framework of this project.

Enhancing marketing strategies may also alleviate pressure on employees, contributing to a less stressful and more sustainable working environment within small business operations. Implementing effective marketing strategies can help marketing teams and small business leaders avoid pursuing potentially flawed approaches.

Finally, when products meet consumers' expectations, the likelihood of returns is reduced. Returning or replacing products that do not meet customer expectations places additional pressure on the overall system, particularly on logistics, as items must be shipped back to the original storage location and, if necessary, replaced. Adibfar et al. (2022) observed that online shopping presents two contrasting effects: it allows consumers to save time and reduce personal environmental impact by avoiding travel, yet it simultaneously increases the number of delivery vehicles on the roads. Effective marketing strategies implemented by small business leaders can help minimize unnecessary actions, thereby reducing operational inefficiencies and mitigating environmental costs.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this proposed qualitative pragmatic inquiry was to understand the online shopping marketing strategies employed by some small business marketing leaders

to increase demand for products and services. During the research, several areas emerged that could not be addressed within the scope of this project.

All small business leaders interviewed in this project emphasized the importance of experimental strategies, particularly testing new channels, tools, and platforms to increase sales revenue. However, it was notable that only one participant referenced using artificial intelligence. In contrast, automated marketing tools, such as email marketing, can enhance customer engagement, click-through rates, sales, and return on investment, optimizing time and resource allocation and reducing the likelihood of human error (Naikwade et al., 2024). Given the growing trend in artificial intelligence adoption, future research could examine how small businesses can further utilize artificial intelligence to enhance the efficiency of their marketing strategies.

Another potential direction for future research could explore the challenges small business leaders encounter when integrating artificial intelligence into their marketing practices. These challenges may include ethical considerations, technical competencies, management support, and consumer expectations related to data usage and information privacy (Richards, 2023). Although this topic has been addressed in existing literature, future studies could focus specifically on the context of small businesses.

In this project, I found that small business leaders consider consumer-centric strategies, including a focus on trust, as one of the essential elements of their marketing strategies. However, the consumer perspective and the potential social impact on customers were not within the main scope of this research. Future studies may explore trust as a mediating factor in the relationship between customers and small businesses,

particularly newly established ones that have not yet developed the reputation associated with incumbent market players.

Finally, another potential implication for future research is the impact of a small business's location on its marketing strategies. In this project, participants from three different locations – Seattle, WA; Vancouver, BC; and Toronto, ON – shared their strategies. However, the purpose of this project was not to examine regional differences in marketing approaches. Therefore, this subject could be further explored in future research.

Conclusion

Upon concluding the research, I identified a range of marketing strategies that small business leaders use to increase their online sales. Strategies such as a focus on paid marketing and non-paid marketing were found to be popular among the majority of participants. While these strategies may appear broad and encompass various micro-strategies, other frequently mentioned approaches were more specific and less expected. The willingness of small business leaders to experiment with and test new channels, tools, and technologies may reflect the competitive and unstable nature of the market in which they operate. This observation was partially supported by participants' accounts of challenges that hindered their growth and the successful implementation of strategies. Small business leaders identified industry-related concerns, including uncertainty, internal misalignments, and resource constraints, as the primary barriers to progress and the execution of planned strategies. However, despite these challenges, it was evident that

small business leaders remained optimistic and held positive expectations regarding the outcomes of their strategies.

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Appendix A: Invitation for Research Project Participation

Subject:

Dear [Name],

There is a new project about small business consumer behavior-based strategies that could help business leaders better understand which online shopping marketing strategies can they use to increase the company's revenue. For this project, you are invited to describe your experience using variable marketing strategies.

About the project:

- One 45-60 minute Zoom or in-person interview that will be audiorecorded (no videorecording)
- To protect your privacy, the published project will not share any names or details that identify you

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Business leader
- Business should be located in Canada or United States of America (Seattle, WA; Vancouver, BC; Toronto, ON)
- Business should run online sales

This interview is part of the doctoral project for Alexander Sakharov, a DBA student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during November 2024 – April 2025.

Please reach out by email to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

What I will do	What I will say
Once I receive consent from the participants in response to the informed consent form, I will send an email with the suggested meeting time options. Once the participant confirms the meeting time, I will send a Zoom meeting invitation if the interview is planned over Zoom platform or confirm the meeting address if the appointment is scheduled in person. I will take precautions for Zoom interviews, such as ensuring the interviewee is in a comfortable environment before the questionnaire begins. For in-person meetings, I will confirm that our conversation cannot be overheard by others nearby.	
Once the meeting is started, I will introduce myself.	Hello (Participant name)! Thank you for accepting the invitation. My name is Alexander Sakharov; I am a student in the Doctor of Business Administration program at Walden University.
Next, I will inform the interviewee about the interview structure.	The length of this interview is approximately 45-60 minutes. You will hear 6-12 questions from me regarding your experience with variable consumer behavior-based marketing strategies you have used in your business to increase online sales.
I will remind about the purpose of the research and ensure the secure data storage obtained during this interview.	The purpose of this project is to understand the online shopping marketing strategies that some small business marketing leaders use to increase demand for products and services. I also would like to remind you that your identity will be kept confidential within the limits of the law. I will not use your personal

	information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, I will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the project reports. Any datasets would contain no identifiers. Data obtained from this interview will be kept secure on a separate flash disk accessible only to me to store the archived file with the interview transcripts. The archived file will be locked using a strong password. This data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.
I will ask for permission to record the interview and remind that the interviewee can always request to stop the interview. I will state the date, time, and the location of the interviewee.	I would like to get your permission to record this session. I also want to remind you that you can stop the interview anytime.
During the interview, I will: • Ask questions • Watch for nonverbal cues. • Paraphrase as needed. • Ask follow-up probing questions to get more in depth.	I will now ask you some questions. 1. What effective online marketing strategies have you used to increase demand for products and services? 2. What strategies do you use to market the rewards of your products and services to increase demand for them? 3. What challenges do you encounter when implementing these strategies? 4. How did you overcome the challenges? 5. How do you measure the success of your strategies? 6. What additional information would you like to share about effective online marketing strategies that we have not covered?
I will then wrap up the interview, remind about follow-up member-checking interview, and thank the participant	This is the end of the interview. Thank you for participating. I will contact you within the next few weeks to schedule another meeting to hear your feedback regarding the researcher's interpretations of this interview (this is called

	member checking and it takes 20-30 minutes via Zoom). Can you please confirm if I can use the same email as before for further communications?
I will schedule follow-up member checking interview. I will send an email within a few weeks after the interview to request the availability of the participant. Once the date and time are confirmed, no earlier than 48 hours, but no later than 24 hours before the member checking interview, I will send an email to participant with the answer summary (synthesis) of the previous interview.	Email: Dear (Participant Name), Hope you are doing well. Thank you again for participating in the interview on (date of the interview). As a part of the interview process, I have attached a summary of the interview answers to confirm the accuracy of their interpretations. If you find any errors, we can discuss them during our next meeting. I will correct them according to your clarification. Thank you, and I am looking forward to it.
During the member checking interview, I will listen to the interviewee's feedback about the answers synthesis and, if necessary, make notes for further correction. I will share a copy of the succinct synthesis for each individual question before the interview (by email) and also share the display screen (if on Zoom) or hard copy (if in person). I will walk through each question, read the interpretation, and ask: Did I miss anything? Is the interpretation correct? What would you like to add?	1. What effective online marketing strategies have you used to increase demand for products and services? 2. What strategies do you use to market the rewards of your products and services to increase demand for them? 3. What challenges do you encounter when implementing these strategies? 4. How did you overcome the challenges? 5. How do you measure the success of your strategies? 6. What additional information would you like to share about effective online marketing strategies that we have not covered?
I will thank the interviewee for the time and for the contribution to the research.	Thank you again for your time and for your contribution to this research. Results of this project will be automatically published online in Scholarworks (a publication of Walden University doctoral research) which

	can be viewed free of charge. Once the project is over, I will be happy to share the link to access it.