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Marketing and Microbusiness

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Joran Premo-Hurt

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Abstract

Marketing and Microbusiness

by

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BSN, Salisbury University, 2001

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2016

Abstract

Marketing plays an influential role in small business survival. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. Marketing orientation (MO) provided the conceptual framework for this study. Guided by an abridged interview protocol, 4 retail microbusiness owners from Delaware participated in audio-recorded, semistructured interviews. Saturation of data occurred after 3 interviews, confirmed when the 4th interview produced no new information. After transcribing the interviews, member checking occurred, as each participant received a summary of the interview, along with thematic interpretations to ensure accurate capture of their intended meaning. The data were triangulated using the audio-recordings, transcriptions, observations, field notes, and Internet documents. From the coded data, 3 main themes emerged: (a) role of business owner as marketing instrument, (b) human capital, time, and self, and (c) relationships and networking. Positive social change may result from helping retail microbusiness owners understand the (a) identity relationship that exists between retail microbusiness owners and their business, (b) importance of active owner involvement in marketing, and (c) significant influence of networking and relationships on profitability. These findings may also promote firm and local economic stability through greater understanding of microbusiness owner marketing orientation and effective mechanisms for the integration of marketing activities into operations.

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Dedication

As I reflect upon my journey through both the doctoral process and life, there are no words that describe it better than those of Colton Dixon (2014, track 11): “I have won and I have lost. I got it right sometimes, but sometimes I did not. Life's been a journey. I've seen joy, I've seen regret. Oh and you have been my God through all of it.” I stand in awe of His faithfulness even during my moments of greatest weakness. To my husband, love of my life and best friend, who has cheered me on throughout the highs and lows, I could not have done this without you. To my son, Geoffrey, may you grow to understand and appreciate the importance of dedication and hard work. To my parents, Jeff and Linda Premo, and brother, Daniel Premo, thank you for your steadfast love, prayerful support, and words of encouragement. I love you all.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Marketing, cited for its influence on firm performance (Perry, 2014), offers microbusiness owners the opportunity to increase the profitability and sustainability of their firm. The reliance on established marketing rules by traditional marketing theories and practices directly conflicts with the unique and unstructured nature of microbusiness, hindering the transferability of larger firm marketing research (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Haniff & Halim, 2014). The divergent nature of a microbusiness is heavily, if not solely, influenced by the ideals, knowledge, and skills of the owner, whose expertise often lies in their product or service, not in how the product or service is marketed (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Haniff & Halim, 2014).

Bearing responsibility for all aspects of operations, microbusiness owners continuously prioritize the tasks of their role and allocation of limited resources (Fiore, Niehm, Hurst, Son, & Sadachar, 2013), weighing cost against benefit for every decision (Cordeiro, 2013). The number of resources, financial and nonfinancial, allocated to marketing activities intended to monitor and respond to changes in consumer demands and competitor activities, reflects not only the business owner's level of marketing orientation (Gupta, Sahi, & Chahal, 2013) but also the recognition of marketing's influence on performance. Current microbusiness owners, individuals considering microbusiness start-up, and microbusiness support services need marketing research that provides practical and effective mechanisms for increasing market orientation (MO) and integrating marketing activities into practice (Lilien, 2011).

Background of the Problem

The largest percentage of businesses within the U.S. small business segment are very small, termed microbusinesses, and often exhibit qualities such as (a) having few or no employees, (b) being owner managed and operated, and (c) continuing to experience a higher rate of failure than their larger counterparts within the same segment (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014). Researchers on small business success and failure have agreed that (a) the small business sector contributes significantly to the economy (Ates & Bititci, 2011; Jasra, Khan, Hunjra, Rehman, & Azam, 2011), (b) the failure rate of small business is too high (Lussier & Halabi, 2010), and (c) more small business research is needed to improve success rates (Arasti, Zandi, & Talebi, 2012). Despite points of agreement, a gap continues to exist between theory and practice (Lilien, 2011) as the smallest of firms, in terms of size, present the greatest complexities, failing to fit the mold set by traditional theory (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Haniff & Halim, 2014).

Marketing plays a significant role in small business survival, cited as an influential contributor to small business success (Perry, 2014). Dynamic in nature, marketing is an ongoing process, continually monitoring the environment, collecting information, and responding to changes, both consumer and competitor-related. The ability of microbusiness owners to incorporate this dynamic process into daily operations reflects their level of market orientation.

For microbusiness owners, the benefits of integrating marketing activities into their operations are not readily grasped, as the return on investment is often difficult to measure (Haniff & Halim, 2014; Morgan, 2012). Furthermore, the process is complicated

by a lack of marketing expertise (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012) and limited resources (Fiore et al., 2013). Constantly having to prioritize responsibilities and stretch sparse resources, microbusiness owners need effective mechanisms for integrating marketing activities into practice, thereby strengthening their market orientation. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the market orientation of microbusiness retail store owners, specifically how they collected and monitored information related to consumers and competitors and then transformed the gathered data into operational marketing activities.

Problem Statement

Approximately 50% of small businesses survive beyond the first 5 years (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2014), and marketing plays an essential role in small business success (Perry, 2014). Sixty-five percent of small business owners lack the necessary skills to manage their marketing activities (Looney & Ryerson, 2011). The general business problem is that marketing activities of some microbusiness owners are insufficient to improve firm performance. The specific business problem is that some microbusiness retail store owners lack effective mechanisms for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. Four active microbusiness retail store owners from Delaware participated in semistructured interviews, focusing on their processes for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational

marketing activities. The implication for positive social change includes an enriched understanding of the market orientation through depth of detail (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), as the findings of this study may enlighten policy and education initiatives aimed at supporting the small business sector and those impacted by its success or failure.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative studies involve understanding the human experience through dialogue and observation. Themes that emerge from individuals or groups with shared experiences or cultures help guide the research (Kisely & Kendall, 2011). This methodology may have an unstructured nature and involves smaller sample sizes (Small, 2011). While Lussier and Halabi (2010) recommended the use of the qualitative methodology for studying small business failure, Bettiol, Di Maria, and Finotto (2012) further supported its suitability for studying small business due to the focus on explanation rather than prediction or measurement. The exploratory nature of this study did not align with a quantitative or mixed methods approach. A qualitative methodology provides the most appropriate approach for gathering the depth of detail desired in this study.

Qualitative methodology provides several key design options including (a) ethnography, (b) case study, and (c) phenomenological (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Each design provides a different approach to the data collection process to support the overall purpose. Ethnography explores patterns of behavior, beliefs, and languages shared within a cultural phenomenon, requiring extended observation and researcher participation in order to develop an understanding of the cultural group (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012). Phenomenological studies explore lived

experiences of participants who experienced a shared phenomenon (Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). The purpose of this study, exploring the marketing activities of successful microbusiness retail store owners, determined the appropriate research design. The ability to account for contextual influences, while gathering a variety of perspectives, provides greater insight into complex situations (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2014). Case study design supports the capture of comprehensive detail regarding a complex topic through interviews with a small group of microbusiness owners. The other design options, while supporting the depth of information, involve additional facets not relevant to the purpose of this study.

Research Question

The research question in this study is as follows: What mechanisms do microbusiness retail store owners use to collect, monitor, and transform market data into marketing activities?

Interview Questions

1. What marketing tools (traditional and nontraditional) do you use to communicate with your customers?
2. How often do you elicit feedback from customers?
3. How do you integrate customer feedback into your marketing activities?
4. How do you monitor and respond to competitor activity and changes in industry trends?
5. How do you measure the effectivity of your marketing activities?

6. How do you allocate resources, financial and nonfinancial, to marketing activities?
7. What education or professional experience do you have that supports your ability to manage the marketing activities of your business?
8. Is there any other information related to marketing activities that you feel would add value to this study?

Conceptual Framework

Small business researchers have argued that circumstances, not concepts or theories, determine the marketing activities within small firms (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014). The ability of the microbusiness retail store owner to recognize the circumstances and produce an effective marketing response reflects the essence of market orientation. Developed from the marketing concept, MO includes three key components: market intelligence, market dissemination, and responsiveness (Sashi, 2012).

Firms exhibiting a high level of MO experience higher levels of success (Lam et al., 2014; Mokhtar, Yusoff, & Ahmad, 2014; Orvis, 1996). Using MO to explore retail store performance, Orvis (1996) found a significantly positive relationship between high levels of MO and high levels of performance, and Ngo and Cass (2012) commented on the relationship between the level of MO and the availability and utilization of marketing resources within a firm. Microbusiness owners display MO if they accept the marketing concept and implement marketing activities that assimilate information gathered from the consumer and the industry (Mokhtar et al., 2014). An MO focused business can improve performance, specifically products and services, because of the focus on customer

satisfaction (Lo, Mohamad, Ramayah, & Wang Yin, 2015), while those who choose to ignore its relevance and influence on performance may experience higher levels of poor performance and failure. Studying MO and Malaysian small medium enterprise (SME) performance, Mokhtar et al. (2014) found significant relationships between customer focus, market dissemination, and performance, but no significant relationship existed between market intelligence, responsiveness, and performance.

Operational Definitions

Entrepreneurial marketing: An organizational function and set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and stakeholders (Kraus, 2010).

Fit: The alignment between high levels of marketing orientation and marketing strategy (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011)

Marketing: The establishment, development, and commercializing of long-term customer relationships in order to meet the goals of all parties through exchange and keeping of promises (Gronroos, 2012)

Marketing activities: A set of marketing organizations used to achieve marketing objectives (Yan-Kai, 2011).

Marketing concept: The total focus of firm activities on the needs and wants of consumers (Gronroos, 2012).

Market orientation: The adoption of the marketing concept evidenced by planning and implementing situationally appropriate marketing functions (Mokhtar et al., 2014).

Marketing resources: Assets available to marketers and others within the organization that when transformed by the firm's marketing capabilities can create valuable outputs (Morgan, 2012).

Marketing strategy: The integration of decisions and actions used to recognize and meet customer needs in order to achieve marketing goals (Mohammadzadeh, Aarabi, & Salamzadeh, 2013)

Microbusiness: A small business having less than five employees (Sen, 2011).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations in this section address aspects or issues assumed true in the study, create potential weaknesses in the study, and exist outside the intended scope of the study respectively. Understanding the parameters of the study helps provide context and potential application of the research. The following paragraphs expand on each of these facets.

Assumptions

Assumptions are factors that affect the validity of stated information: facts assumed to be true (Marosin & van der Torre, 2014). The first assumption is that the microbusiness retail store owners interviewed for this study possessed high MO levels. The second assumption is that the design of this study supported the gathering of important knowledge related to the MO of microbusiness retail store owners. The third assumption is that the findings of this study are applicable within the microbusiness retail segment. The final assumption is that the microbusiness retail store owners who agreed to participate provided truthful answers to the interview questions.

Limitations

Limitations result from the research framework and design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and provide context for the study by revealing the weaknesses present in the research, as seen by the researcher (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2013). This study was limited to microbusiness retail store owners. Other potential limitations included the comprehensive nature of the interviewing instrument producing insufficient information for study, biased responses from participants, and participants declining to provide complete responses. Project limitations included geographical location, as all participants maintained their businesses in the same rural area.

Delimitations

Delimitations include factors that limit the scope of the study and provide boundaries (Simon, 2013). The sample population may be a delimitation in this study, as it excluded microbusiness owners outside of the retail industry and those outside the geographical location of Delaware. Other potential delimitations included participant nonresponse and insufficient information produced by the interview tool.

Significance of the Study

Considered key economic contributors (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012), small businesses structurally and operationally differ from large firms (Fadahunsi, 2012), necessitating research that accounts for the unique nature of small business (Rowley, 2012). Microbusinesses, small businesses with fewer than five employees (Sen, 2011), account for more than 60% of the small business segment (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012) and suffer a 30% higher rate of failure than their larger counterparts (U.S. Small Business

Administration, 2014). Marketing provides microbusiness owners the opportunity to improve profitability and long-term sustainability (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013); however, marketing activities within small firms, specifically microbusinesses, differ significantly from larger organizations (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014). Microbusiness owners lack the marketing expertise (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012) and resources (Fiore et al., 2013) to implement complex marketing initiatives. A need exists to provide practical evidence-based solutions to address the persistent problem of small business failure (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Lilien, 2011).

Contribution to Business Practice

Potential benefits of this study include (a) enriched understanding of effective marketing activities for microbusiness owners, (b) increased knowledge on how to incorporate marketing activities into practice, (c) improved sustainability for microbusiness owners, and (d) a positive impact on the local economy. The findings of this study may enlighten policy and education initiatives aimed at supporting the small business sector by providing insight into microbusiness owner MO as well as optimal approaches for effective integration of marketing activities for microbusiness owners.

Implications for Social Change

The social significance of a study may not be restricted to its ability to influence policy or contribute to academic literature but may exist in its depth of detail (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Improving the success rates of retail microbusinesses impacts not only the business owner and his or her family, but also those associated with or influenced by the activities of the business, including employees, suppliers, local organizations, and the

general community in which the microbusiness owner operates. While failure provides opportunity for learning, it also brings the potential for financial, psychological, and emotional devastation (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). This study allowed for exploration of marketing and its influence on firm success, demonstrating how to integrate effective and practical marketing activities in microbusiness operations. The findings of this study may enlighten policy and education initiatives aimed at supporting the small business sector. Given that microbusinesses represent more than 90% of businesses throughout the world, it is appropriate that this study may address the greater need for applied research that provides practical solutions and structure to drive the economy.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of a literature review is to compile and synthesize prior studies related to the research topic. Walden University library provided the primary databases used for this research study. The databases included ABI/Inform, Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Plus full text, ERIC, SAGE Premier, PsycARTICLES, and dissertations. For this study, I performed a general review of business research literature related to small business success and failure factors, marketing theories, concepts, and applications. The early literature reviews related to success and failure factors for small business led to an in-depth exploration of marketing within small business, specifically microbusiness. As a result, the search keywords for this study included but were not limited to business, small business, microbusiness, entrepreneur, marketing, theory, success, failure, and turnover. The literature review includes 121 references, three of which are government websites for the provision of

small business statistics. Ninety-six percent of the references are peer reviewed with 87% published within 5 years of anticipated CAO approval.

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. The purpose of this study provided the organizational structure for the literature review. Beginning with a review and analysis of market orientation, the framework used to guide this study, the literature review contains an in-depth discussion on theories and concepts found in current marketing research. The rest of the literature review contains an overview of the varying entity structures that comprise the small business segment, the definitions for failure and success found in the research, and a discussion on success and failure factors in relation to marketing.

Marketing Theories and Concepts

Marketing plays a significant role in small business survival, supporting the firm's ability to achieve its primary purpose of customer creation (O'Cass, Ngo, & Siahtiri, 2012) and influence in the firm's failure if inadequate or poorly executed (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Marketing has evolved into a complex field of study and practice, comprised of numerous concepts, theories, and models. Despite this evolution in complexity, marketing within the smallest of small firms is unique, differing significantly from their larger counterparts (Liao, Hung, Kao, & Wu, 2014), influenced by the nature of the business owner, the chief decision-maker, and for many, the sole employee.

Reactive, unstructured, and unique (Ates & Bititci, 2011; Fadahunsi, 2012), an entity directly shaped by the knowledge, skills, and values of the owner (Cronin-Gilmore,

2012) requires theories and concepts that support examination and exploration without contradicting the entity's nature (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Haniff & Halim, 2014). In microbusiness, marketing does not involve complex and strategic planning processes, but rather it relies on the subjective and intuitive response of the owner (Donnelly et al., 2012) based on circumstances (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014). Exploration into the mechanisms used by successful microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities may provide effective tools and solutions to address the high rate of small business turnover.

Marketing orientation encompasses three principles used to guide the exploration process: information acquisition, information dissemination, and information integration in marketing response. Information acquisition addresses how the microbusiness owner gathers information related to customers as well as competitors. The marketing concept, introduced by Drucker in 1954, provided the foundation for MO, contending that the basic function of a business is to generate new customers (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011). While customer generation is an important starting point, sustainable success results from the ability to recognize and address consumer needs better than competitors (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011). The marketing concept, also called market-oriented view, encourages a firm to allow the input of customers to determine its activities (Achrol & Gundlach, 2014; Gronroos, 2012), and the consumer experience, rather than services or goods, to drive economic value. An unwillingness to accept the influence of consumers on firm performance contributes to higher rates of failure (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012), making

implementation of marketing strategies that support customer satisfaction critical to survival. The singular focus on customer creation has drawn criticism for the significance given to customer influence on decision-making (Houston, 1986) and for its neglect in recognizing the importance of customer retention (Lo et al., 2015). In their study on marketing planning in small business, Donnelly et al. (2012) stated that MO supported the exploration of the solution-oriented problem solving process used by small business owners.

Entrepreneurial theories used within marketing research focus on the influence of the owner on the marketing activities, as opposed to the external influences of consumers and competitors. The term *entrepreneur* refers to an individual who starts and manages a business but the term does not necessarily mean that the business is small, and entrepreneurial intent, or the desire of an individual to start a new venture (Parente & Feola, 2013), does not equate to entrepreneurial skills, or their ability to sustain the venture (Bressler, 2012). Entrepreneurial studies comprise a significant percentage of small business research, and the United States has the highest number of entrepreneurs per capita when compared with their industrialized counterparts (Mattare, Monahan, & Shah, 2011).

Entrepreneurial marketing (EM), resulting from studies on marketing and entrepreneurship (Toombs & Harlow, 2014), suggests that the entrepreneurial approach towards innovation and opportunity enhances creativity and value delivery, both fundamental to marketing; however, the manner in which marketing progresses from idea to implementation is unique within small business (Fiore et al., 2013). In entrepreneurial

marketing, the aspect of adaptation exists, wherein the components of the marketing mix are adjusted to the environment in which the entrepreneur operates, characterized by informal and quick decision making (Penpece, 2014). Introduced in 2002 by Morris, and used in the research of Fiore et al. (2013), the EM concept originally consisted of seven dimensions: proactive orientation, opportunity driven, customer intensity, innovation focused, risk management, resource leveraging, and value creation. The original construct of EM, as cited by Ionita (2012), lacked development and empirical study in small owner firms, which spurred the expansion work of Fiore et al. (2013). The researchers (Fiore et al., 2013) introduced a new multidimensional EM scale for use with small businesses, which contained four dimensions and demonstrated greater construct validity and reliability than prior scales.

Studying EM and technology, Jones, Suoranta, and Rowley (2013a) offered that the integration of EM and MO result in better performance than the use of MO alone. The researchers (Jones et al., 2013a) studied small software technology firms using the EMICO framework which integrated entrepreneur, marketing, innovation (IO), and customer orientations (CO). Using a qualitative approach with semistructured interviews and purposive sampling, the researchers (Jones et al., 2013a) compared growth between a U.S. firm and a U.K. firm, finding that the U.K. firm had a higher focus on CO, which slowed firm growth, as the developers spent extensive amounts of time dealing with consumers. This issue exemplifies Houston's (1986) argument regarding the misperceptions of the customer focus aspect of MO. While customer needs are important considerations, they should not hold business operations hostage (Houston, 1986). The

U.S. firm focused on EO, MO, and IO, which supported quicker growth (Jones et al., 2013a). EO contains elements of similarity to EM, focusing on the characteristics of the entrepreneur. Using EO, MO, and learning orientation (LO) in their study on small firm performance, Lonial and Carter (2015) offered that small firms who employ multiple orientations, exemplifying greater breadth of company capabilities, perform better in the market.

Brand theory, another marketing theory that focuses on the consumer, supports the notion that the establishment of a brand provides consumers with some tangible notions regarding the product, including quality level and purchasing risk (Uusitalo, 2014). Using brand theory for the framework with a case study design, Uusitalo (2014) explored the role of brand creation and marketing within three small manufacturing companies involved in the international market. Uusitalo concluded that brand utilization helped expand business in a competitive market through recognition. Brand orientation, introduced by Urde in 1999, is an extension of brand theory (Baumgarth, Merrilees, & Urde, 2013). Offered by the author as an enhancement to market orientation, Urde claimed both brand orientation and market orientation to be a mindset: to be brand orientated is to be market orientated (Baumgarth et al., 2013).

Combing the first and second principle of MO, the Internet supports rapid gathering and dissemination of information, both positive and negative. This provides a driving force for strategic marketing practices through a variety of social media platforms. The ability to exchange information with consumers, suppliers, and even competitors in real time provides an advantage for small business owners who seize the

opportunity and can help mitigate the resource limitations of small firms (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). While the second principle of MO, information dissemination, focuses on how the business owner shares the collected information with employees, this aspect of MO has less relevance in microbusiness, as over 60% of small businesses have fewer than five employees (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Taking an alternative approach to information dissemination, value creation occurs through interactions from business to consumer, consumer to consumer, and consumer to business (Parry et al., 2012).

Dynamic capabilities theory, used in the research of Atanassova and Clark (2015) provided a framework for studying how small business acquired and applied new knowledge and ideas gained through social media venues. According to the researchers, the continuous existence of the SME owner in the market offers an opportunity to improve their customer focus through constant interaction and relationship building, making the role of the SME owner critical to firm growth. The use of social media for networking can mitigate resource constraints through low cost, easy to operate platforms (Atanassova & Clark, 2015).

In their study on word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing, Castronovo and Huang (2012) provided a marketing model designed for small and medium sized firms, based on communication among consumers. WOM is critical to the marketing process, as purchasing decisions often results from the advice of others. All the social media platforms included in their study provided opportunity for consumer engagement, not only with the business, but also with others who traversed the site while considering the purchase of goods or services. The premise of their study was that the effectivity of social

media should result in measurable business through increased awareness, increased sales, or increased loyalty; however, they emphasized that site traffic, which is measurable for all social media platforms, does not directly equate to sales (Castronovo & Huang, 2012).

Studying WOM in health care marketing, Fredericks (2011) emphasized the decline of traditional marketing venues, stressing that WOM through family and friend referrals is far more effective. Fundamental to his argument is that the human propensity to communicate drives WOM, and its effectivity results from the fact that the communication is not the product of an underlying profit motive (Fredericks, 2011). Effective communication necessitates operative relationships (Parry et al., 2012), and relationship building and attention to the consumer experience promotes positive WOM marketing at no charge to the business owner.

Continuing with the importance of communication and relationships in marketing, networking provides small business owners with information and the opportunity to build and maintain customer relationships (Harrigan, Ramsey, & Ibbotson, 2012; Schoonjans, Cauwenberge, & Bauwhede, 2013). Studying small business relationship marketing within the framework of identity, Preechanont and Lu (2013) emphasized the lack of distinction that exists between business identity and owner identity in very small business. The ability of the business to build customer relationships is a reflection of the owner's relationship building skills. Taking into consideration the resource limitations, the smaller consumer base, and the lack of marketing skills, smaller businesses rely on alternative marketing techniques, including relationship marketing, to survive (Preechanont & Lu, 2013). Advantages for SMEs include their ability to be in direct

communication with the consumer and flexibility in responding to consumer needs (Marek, 2014).

A qualitative study by O'Donnell (2014) on networking and small business introduced a conceptual model that contextualized marketing networking within the small business domain. The study extended resource based view (RBV) to small firms and accounted for those factors that distinguish small firms from large firms. In RBV, elements owned or controlled by the firm constitute resources, and the ability of firm owner to levy these resources better than competitors provides advantage (Webb, Morris, & Pillay, 2013). Heavily reliant on human capital as a resource (Price & Stoica, 2015), small firm owners engage in various networking activities to compensate for their marketing challenges (Jones et al., 2013b). Examples of information gained from networking activities include potential new customers and market segments, ideas for new products or processes, cost saving opportunities, chain supply options, and resource support. Networking, if used effectively, can serve as a significant contributor to the marketing efforts of small businesses (Achrol & Gundlach, 2014).

Combining technology with customer focus, customer-relationship management (CRM) is a customer-centric approach, comprised of four actions that influence the relationship: acquiring, retaining, increasing, and regaining customers (Castronovo & Huang, 2012), extending the original scope of the marketing concept that focused specifically on customer acquisition. CRM provided the framework for a study by Harrigan et al. (2012) on the integration of the Internet in SME marketing approaches. The researchers suggested that the network marketing performed by SMEs through their

focus on the consumer relationship illustrates CRM theory. They further suggested that the integration of electronic marketing (e-marketing) into the consumer relationship (e-CRM) necessitates a calculated approach, ensuring that its involvement enables rather than discourages the relationship (Harrigan et al., 2012).

The use of electronic CRM or e-CRM provides several cost and time saving marketing opportunities for SMEs, including the ability to have an online presence versus a physical establishment. Using a mixed methods approach consisting of a survey followed by in-depth interviews, Harrigan et al. (2012) found that e-CRM provided small businesses with several advantages including reduced marketing costs. One respondent in the study by Harrigan et al. added that their marketing expenses had decreased through less use of advertising and greater reliance on their website. Social CRM expands upon the customer relationship to include the use of social media for encouraging the consumer to share their experience with others, and similar to WOM (Castronovo & Huang, 2012), it creates greater value through partnership and interaction (Toombs & Harlow, 2014).

The third principle of MO involves information integration and marketing response, specifically how the business owner uses gathered information to determine marketing activities. A study on MO by O’Cass et al. (2012) introduced a conceptual model where marketing resources and marketing capabilities evolve from MO to marketing planning capability (strategy) and then marketing mix implementation (operation). The researchers further suggested that superior firm performance results from the possession and full engagement of marketing capabilities unique to the firm. Marketing resources, alone, bear no impact on firm performance without the integration

of marketing capabilities (O’Cass et al., 2012). In its original context, Gordon (2012) argued that marketing mix, or the balance struck among product, price, place, and promotion, lacks application with evolution of technology and social media. The author furthered the argument, adding that the simplicity of the original context fails to account for the strategies made available by technology, influencing the effectivity of the marketing response (Gordon, 2012).

In 1986, Houston cautioned against the misuse of MO, offering that the heavy reliance on customer input to direct marketing activities produces a continually reactive and unstable approach, negating the expertise of the business owner (Houston, 1986). In addition, Fernandez-Huerga (2013) offered that the premise of the market concept assumed that customer behavior followed a rule set governed by utility. Houston expanded the concept of MO, reasoning that the passivity of customers skews the marketing approach and encouraging the business owner to focus on other dynamic aspects of business environment to determine opportunity (Gray & Wert-Gray, 2012). This change in the focus of MO integrates a contingency approach, while not consumer driven, it captures the behavior of the owner in reaction to external forces. Contingency theory, introduced in 1961 by Burns and Stalker (Cui, Walsh, & Zou, 2014) offers that forces in the external environment impact firm behavior (Boso, Story, Cadogan, & Ashie, 2015), and that an appropriate mix of strategy, organizational structure, and environment results in success (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011). Studied within the context of contingency theory, Pleshko and Heiens (2011) examined the relationship between MO and marketing strategies, suggesting that the utilization of MO supports a firm’s ability to sense market

trends and anticipate consumer needs. Using the concept of *fit*, Pleshko and Heiens (2011) offered that the effectivity of marketing strategies depend on the agreement of firm structure and environmental factors, and Anionwu, Nwaizugbo, and Ukenna (2014) added that small firms need to adapt their marketing strategies in response to opportunities. Understanding the importance of fit among firm resources, firm capabilities, and market conditions aids in adaptation ability and supports survival (Baptista, Karaoz & Mendonca, 2014). Failure to match marketing strategy and MO may result in inefficient use of resources and decreased market shares (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011).

An integrated marketing approach provides small business owners with the ability to communicate their message while developing beneficial relationships with consumers (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). As technology continues to develop email marketing, search engine optimization, social media platforms, viral marketing, guerilla marketing, events based marketing, and mobile marketing provide lower cost options for integration of marketing with customer interaction (Bressler, 2012; Castronovo & Huang, 2012; Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). Social media provides a platform for direct communication between business and consumer without the need for constant promotion and increases approachability, skill building, and relational management (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Social media, as explained by Bakeman and Hanson (2012) couples relationship building with a communication medium. Over the past decade, the number of small businesses using social media has doubled. In 2012, Stelzner surveyed 3800 SMEs regarding their use of social media and found that the platform supports greater business exposure,

increases consumer traffic, and supports networking (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). The accessibility of social media has increased with the growing prevalence of mobile devices.

According to the 2011 Internet world statistics, Internet use increased around the world by almost 500% from 2000 to 2010, thus its role cannot be ignored (Iniesta-Bonillo, Sanchez-Fernandez, & Cervera-Taulet, 2012). In 2013, the use of the Internet via mobile devices increased to 500 million just in China (Xia & Pedraza-Jimenez, 2015). An online presence for small business owners assists with maximizing promotion of product and services through greater visibility and interaction; however, the difficulty in measuring investment return, lack of resources, and unfamiliarity with social media platforms often deter small business owners from pursuing an online presence (Xia & Pedraza-Jimenez, 2015).

Market orientation, despite its popularity in the research, received criticism for the employment of measurement scales that lack reliability and validity (Kaur, Lonial, Gupta, & Seli, 2013). The premise of MO offers a positive relationship with profitability, customer relations, employee satisfaction, and overall business performance; however, MKTOR and MARKOR, the measurement scales used in prior MO research demonstrated shortfalls under further analysis (Farrell & Oczkowski, 1997; Kaur et al., 2013). MKTOR, introduced in 1990 by Narver and Slater, consisted of 21 items and demonstrated poor fit when tested by Siguaw and Diamantopoulos in 1994 (Farrell & Oczkowski, 1997). The MKTOR scale, posited by Kohli et al. (1993), had too narrow a focus, failing to capture significant elements of both the process contained within MOAs

well as behaviors that represent MO. Producing their own scale, Kohli et al. (1993) introduced MARKOR, a 20 item scale criticized for failing to operationalize the true concept of MO and lacking substantiation of reliability and validity (Farrell & Oczkowski, 1997). Using a confirmatory factor analysis, Farrell and Oczowski (1997) tested the MARKOR and MKTOR scales, finding that with deletions of specific items, each scale demonstrated good fit, convergent validity, and acceptable reliability. The revised scale of Farrell and Oczowski (1997) provided the basis for the interview questions used in this study.

The lack of marketing expertise adds to the challenges small business owners are already battling (Cronin-Glimore, 2012), and the divide between theory and practice in marketing deters finding timely and practical solutions to real world problems (Lilien, 2011). In 2012, Rowley offered an approach to marketing research that parallels the evidence-based practice approach found in medical research. Evidence-based marketing (EBM) serves to bring theory and practice together, integrating expertise with research evidence and stakeholder perspectives (Rowley, 2012). Four barriers prevent the application of research findings to real world problems for small business owners (Rowley, 2012). These barriers include relevance, access, time, and language (Rowley, 2012). Echoing a shared sentiment regarding separation between researcher and business owner, Lilien (2011) argued the need for marketing research that provides effective solutions to current problems in real time, and Yan-Kai (2011) offered that environmental factors influence the generalized application of marketing principles and practices. Ineffective marketing frameworks combined with substantial resource limitations fuel the

continuing marketing challenges faced by SMEs. As noted by Rowley (2012) the business owner judges the importance of research based on its ability to provide a solution to a current situation, not for its general application to the realm of business. Applied research that fails to produce tangible solutions is nothing more than an exercise in futility. Consequently, marketing researchers need to consider the end-user and their ability to integrate the findings into their practice (Lilien, 2011).

Defining Small Business

In order to understand the complexity of marketing within small business, it is important to understand what defines a small business. Independently owned, operated, and managed, small businesses lack dominance in their industry and employ less than 10 employees (Liao et al., 2014). These businesses often operate in a local area, are highly personalized (Lähdesmäki, 2012) and account for 99% of all employer firms (Fiore et al., 2013; Liao et al., 2014). Over 90% of small businesses throughout the world have less than 20 employees (Headd & Kirchhoff, 2009), and in the United States, the majority of small businesses average four employees (Ji & Hannah, 2012). Despite their prevalence and contributions, the small business sector continues to struggle with a high rate of failure.

Failure rates are consistent, but the definitions of small business vary from country to country and researcher to researcher (Liao et al., 2014; Sedliačiková, Hajdúchová, Krištofik, Viszlai, & Gaff, 2016), producing results as diverse as the entities involved. The U.S. Small Business Administration utilizes the North American Industry Classification System (NAICS), which characterizes business entities for the purpose of

data collection and statistical analysis. According to an activity based coding system, business classification occurs according to production methods (Headd, 2010). Other influences in the classification process for industry include entity size, industry competition, startup costs, entry barriers, distribution of firm size and federal contracts held by small businesses.

The NAICS uses benchmarking for classification purposes, starting at 7 million dollars for services, retail trade, construction and other industries with receipts based size standards; 500 employees for the manufacturing, mining, and other industries with employee based size standards; and 100 employees for the wholesale trade industries (Headd, 2010). In 2010, there were 27.9 million small businesses in the United States, approximately 21% had between 1 and 499 employees, while the other 79% consisted of the owner as the sole employee (Gale & Brown, 2013). Neither the 500 employee-based standards or 100 represent the majority of small businesses within the United States, as firms with more than 20 employees comprise less than 10% of small businesses (Headd & Kirchhoff, 2009).

Members of the European Union (EU), which uses a four-tiered system, have argued that a common definition must exist in order to improve consistency and effectiveness within a competitive market. The 4 tiers include self-employed; micro, with 0 to 19 employees; small, with 20 to 99 employees; and medium, with 100 to 499 employees (Ji & Hanna, 2012). China is revising its standards, originally set in 2003, which defined SMEs as having less than 2,000 employees, sales less than 300 million Yuan, or less than 400 million Yuan in assets (Zhang, Ma, & Wang, 2012). Estonia has

two groups, those that have fewer than and those that have more than 10 employees (Nurmet, Lemsalu, & Poder, 2012), while Jordan defines small as fewer than five employees and medium as five to 19 employees (Hamdan, 2012). Taiwan uses net and total capital to define an SME (Chang, Yen, Ng, & Chang, 2012), and others use a 3-tier system with ME, comprised of less than nine employees; SE, less than ninety-nine employees; and ME, one hundred to four hundred and ninety-nine employees (Liao et al., 2014).

The broad application of small business definitions lends itself to groupings that significantly differ in structure and operational dynamics, affecting the generalizability and transferability of the findings (Fadahunsi, 2012). Other researchers (Cant & Wiid, 2013; Coad & Tamvada, 2012) pointed out the importance of further studies to determine universal applicability of success factors between developed and developing countries, as well as between rural and suburban areas within the same country. One example of varying sample populations used within the same study for comparative purposes is from Lussier and Halabi (2010). The three-country comparative study utilized the success versus failure prediction model constructed by Lussier in 1995 in analyzing the countries of Chile, Croatia, and the United States, each of which defines the small business segment differently. The researchers referenced the SBA definition of fewer than 500 employees for the context of this study; however, Chile defines business size in terms of annual sales (OECD, 2012) and Croatia uses the European Union criteria (European Commission, 2013). Included in the sample were 234 small businesses. The largest had 400 employees and the mean was 31. The United States data for this study came from a

study published by Lussier in 1995, and the Croatian data were from a 2001 study done by Lussier and Pfeifer. From the data gathered, firms with an average of 25 employees were predicted to fail and firms averaging 39 employees were predicted to succeed. Both of these numeric references represent company sizes that are larger than the entities defined as small business within many other countries (Hamdan, 2012; Ji & Hanna, 2012; Nurmet et al., 2012), including 90% of those within the United States (Headd & Kirchhoff, 2009).

Studying microbusiness, Sen (2011) defined microbusinesses as having fewer than five employees and less than \$35,000 in start-up costs. Not included in every study, the provision of sample composition enables the reader to consider the findings within the context of similar entities. In medical research, samples share characteristics for variables that affect the outcome, yet significant variances exist in small business research samples. A consistent definition for small business is needed (Islam, Khan, Obaidullah, & Alam, 2011), and understanding the variances that exist, not only within the definitions of small business but also within the sample populations, aids in understanding the inconsistency in findings and the continued high rate of failure.

Defining Failure and Success

The significant number of entity variations that exists in the small business segment emphasizes the difficulty with the application, or transferability, of small business research. It is important to understand that not all business closures are failures, as the definition of small business failure includes within it everything from financial insolvency to owner decision (Ucbasaran, Shepherd, Lockett, & Lyon, 2013), and failure

occurs at varying stages throughout the business life cycle (Amel & Akkari, 2012). For some small business owners, starting a business results from necessity in order to support livelihood (Cichocki, 2012), and often the decision to start a business does not take into account the owner's ability to maintain the business (Parente & Feola, 2013). While failure may provide opportunity for learning (Sarasvathy, Menon, & Kuechle, 2013), the tendency to blame external forces rather than self-evaluate may promote recurrence of failure in future endeavors (Eggers & Lin, 2015).

In a study on home businesses in Maryland, Mattare, Monahan, and Shah (2011) found that 60% of business owners reported being successful when they closed their doors. The term success also contains multiple facets including financial versus nonfinancial and short versus long-term, and its defining character may vary in terms of survival, profit, sales, growth, return on investment, reputation, and other subjective forms (Islam, Khan, Obaidullah, & Alam, 2011). Owner threshold for performance, offered by Ucbasaran et al. (2013), determines the longevity, citing personal performance expectations as influential in the decision to close. While closure may result from falling short of expectations rather than operational failure, statistically all small business closures, regardless of reason, comprise the continued high rate publicized in small business research.

Success and Failure Factors

Though this study focused specifically on microbusiness and marketing, the initial literature review explored the various success and failure factors found within small business research. The studies included in this section of the literature review reference

the small business segment, as few studies explicitly concentrate on the microbusiness segment within small business. This is an important delineation as it exemplifies the challenges small business research face with relation to differentiation of operational dynamics associated with structure and size (Fadahunsi, 2012). The discussion approaches success and failure factors from a relational perspective with marketing, focusing specifically on a few prevalent success and failure factors found in the research.

Finance and its role in small business success and failure has been studied from several different perspectives including accounting (Nwobu, Faboyede, & Onwuelingo, 2015; Pleis, 2014), access (Byrd, Ross, & Glackin, 2013; Elmahgop, Wahab, Elzein, & Edrees, 2015; Kira & He, 2012), resources (Ji & Hanna, 2012; Liao et al., 2014), decision making (Serrasqueiro & Nunes, 2012), performance (Nurmet, Lemsalu, & Poder, 2012), and debt (Di & Hanke, 2012). Each of these studies utilized varying population compositions and economic environments, which produced varying factors determined to be financial influencers of small business success and failure. According to Edmark and Gordon (2013), very small firms have a greater reliance on debt than equity to finance their operations, and access to external financing is necessary to support their cash flow (Byrd et al., 2013; Kira & He, 2012). The decision to increase financial liabilities may increase chances of failure (Di & Hanke, 2012). Over 50% of small businesses within the United States require less than \$5000 for start-up capital (Di & Hanke, 2012), many dependent upon personal financing and family or friends (Liao et al., 2014), enabling self-reliance during the early stages, as opposed to financial institution support. Studying firm age and debt in the context of decision-making, Serrasqueiro and Nunes (2012)

found that ensuring the right mix of short-term and long-term debt in relation to the age of the firm, supported greater sustainability. As the firm ages, it increases its ability to maintain profits, and those profits, rather than external financing, fund investment opportunities (Serrasqueiro & Nunes, 2012). Eighty percent of a company's value is dependent upon its ability to market its assets (McDonald, 2014); therefore, an increased focus on marketing promotes firm profitability and growth, decreasing reliance on external financing.

In their qualitative study on entrepreneurs, Hamrouni and Akkari (2012) claimed that the failure of young firms stemmed from a lack of experience and management skills, whereas failure of established entities resulted from financial mismanagement. Framed within organization life cycle theory, Hamrouni and Akkari studied firm age and turnover, finding that the reasons for failure change as the firm moves through the life cycle phases. Financial management, according to Mazzarol (2014), is one of the largest challenges faced by SMEs, and the combination of inadequate financial resources and poor management constitutes a common theme in small business research (Diehl, Toombs, & Maniam, 2013; Karadag, 2015). Accounting, which supports effective record keeping, timely financial reporting, and detailed analysis for decision-making, is a fundamental aspect of financial management, whose influence on firm health is often underestimated (Nwobu, Faboyede, & Onwuelingo, 2015; Pleis, 2014).

The fragility of small firms requires vigilance by the owners in order to make effective adjustments when the economy fluctuates; however in order to adapt, the owner must recognize change. Small business owners lean towards reactivity in their approach

(Arasti et al., 2012), dealing with the present as it unfolds, as opposed to long term planning, and Ates and Bititci (2011) likened their problem-solving approach to firefighters, reactive once the event has started, as the constant demands negate the time for effective strategic planning (Cordeiro, 2013). The tendency towards short-term planning lends itself to informal decision-making (Ates & Bititci, 2011; Chao & Chandra, 2012) and ignores the need for a more strategic approach often used by larger firms (Cordeiro, 2013). Late recognition or inability to recognize change is cited as an influential contributor to failure in both financial (Hamrouni, & Akkari, 2012) and marketing (Pretorius & le Roux, 2011) studies on small business. Marketing necessitates the constant vigilance of a microbusiness owner to maintain relationships with consumers (Gronroos, 2012), while monitoring the activities of competitors, and responding to both parties as needed.

The focus of entrepreneurial studies, another aspect of small business research, is the owners' characteristics and their relationship to the success or failure of their business (Chowdhury, Alam, & Arif, 2013; Joonas & Wadensjö, 2013). Also referred to as human capital, the knowledge, experience, and skills of the business owner (Gittins & Fink, 2015) are influential in its profitability (Liao et al., 2014). Studying SMEs and entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, Alam et al. (2011) found that the traits of the entrepreneur related directly to the success of the firm, and Pop (2012) offered that the success of SMEs results from the owner's ability to manage all aspects of operations. Studying individual traits and their influence on newly established entities in Iran, Arasti, Sandi, and Talebi (2012) found that management skills were the main contributor to

small business failure. Providing a different perspective, Fahed-Sreih and Morin-Deleem (2012) argued that commitment to excellence influenced the success or failure of small business, while Tasnim, Yahya, and Zainuddin (2014) found that the greater the entrepreneurial passion, the greater the commitment to goal achievement. Education and experience (Millan, Congregado, & Roman, 2012), motivation (Inacio & Gimenez, 2012), and personality traits and values (Lange, 2012) are linked to business turnover in small business research.

Innovation, also found within the context of entrepreneurial studies, represents both an outcome, in terms of a new idea or product, and a process, in terms of the events that transpire from idea to production (Gronum, Verreynne, & Kastle, 2012), which contributes value to the firm (Levy, 2012). Influential on small firm survival, innovation drives sustainable outcomes (Bello & Ivanov, 2014; Gagnon, Michael, Elser, & Gyory, 2013; Peltier & Naidu, 2012). The adoption of technology as an indicator of innovation within small business research focuses on the business owner's willingness to accept and implement systems designed to improve the operational management of all aspects of the business (Chao & Chandra, 2012; Setiowati, Hartoyo, Daryanto, & Arifin, 2015). Change in small business is a complex issue (Hamdan, 2012) as perceived utility often provides the greatest influence in adoption (Sam, Hoshino, & Tahir, 2012). Studying owner's knowledge and expertise as a firm resource, Chao and Chandra (2012) examined the acceptance of technology within small business, finding that the owner's knowledge served as a significant predictor of technology adoption and integration within the firm. In their study on the influence of information technology adoption on marketing

capabilities and business performance, Setiowati et al. (2015) offered similar findings with regards to the relationship between owner knowledge and the adoption and integration of information technology. The adoption of technology offers the ability to improve both performance and utilization of resources (Yazdanfar & Salman, 2012); however, Hamdan (2012) argued technology to be unnecessary in very small firms, as 10 of the 15 microbusinesses included in his study did not even own a computer.

Marketing opportunities have evolved, providing growth potential for small business (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013); however, most microbusinesses fail to recognize this and integrate marketing into operations (Pop, 2012). The marketing efforts of these small entities, described as experimental, diverse, and informal (Nakara, Benmoussa, & Jaouen, 2012), aligns with the nature of business owner's decision-making. Exploring the difference in marketing approach between small business and microbusiness, Parilla (2013) offered that the focus on product and service promotion existed largely within small businesses rather than microbusinesses. Technology provides many low cost options for small business marketing through a variety of platforms designed to maintain constant interaction with consumers when compared to traditional marketing activities (Castronovo & Huang, 2012), yet Omar, Ramayah, Lin, Mohamad, and Marimuthu (2011) found that over 50% of the SMEs interviewed for their study lacked awareness regarding the benefits of Internet-based marketing.

The use of social media by small business has doubled since 2008, offering the opportunity for relationship building with current and prospective customers, increasing visibility and sales potential (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). In 2012, Stelzner reported the

positive impact of social media platforms on business growth, through increased exposure and traffic. Increased sales and market size, improved customer satisfaction, and reduced marketing expenses are just a few of the benefits enjoyed by small businesses owners who use social media for marketing (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014); however, Bakeman and Hanson (2012) argued that while social media is cost effective, it does require time and proficiency, both considered to be limited resources in very small business. Consequently, a reliance on WOM, websites, and traditional local marketing continue to dominate small business marketing.

As marketing continues a shift towards electronic venues, Wergin and Muller (2012) presented a case study which compared traditional and electronic marketing to determine which had greater effectivity. The study stemmed from the desire of small furniture store owners to measure the effectiveness of their current marketing efforts, which included television, newspaper, and radio. The owners also wanted to know if their marketing efforts were reaching their intended audience (Wergin & Muller, 2012). The researchers (Wergin & Muller, 2012) included newspaper print advertising, newspaper website advertising, store website advertising, and store email advertising and used coded coupons for tracking and measurement. Over a four week period, the researchers collected 69 coupons. Fifty-six percent of the coupons came from the printed newspaper, which, the owners' felt correlated with their targeted demographic group (Wergin & Muller, 2012). Despite the growing prevalence of electronic marketing, this study exemplified the importance of matching marketing strategies with the intended consumer group.

While traditional media is a functional marketing option, it constitutes one-way communication, disregarding the benefit of targeted marketing through interaction (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). In the same manner websites that lack interactive mechanisms serve in a traditional media capacity, displaying only products, services, and company information, disregarding the opportunity for interaction and transaction (Omar et al., 2011). Failure to recognize and accept the role of technology contributes to small business failure, specifically the opportunity to support firm growth through marketing technologies (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). While the benefits of implementing social media into small business marketing seem credible, the two-way interaction that it produces requires consistent participation, consuming the already limited resource of time in small business (Bakeman & Hanson, 2012).

Operating a small business requires diligence in all aspects of operations management, negating the ability to ignore other success and failure factors found in the literature; however, firms must maintain profitability through growth in order to survive. Small business owners need to identify, analyze, and assess marketing opportunities better than their competitors in order to achieve success (Elmahgop et al., 2015). While marketing is essential to success, small business owners must maintain efficient operations and financial stability, requiring innovative and cost saving mechanisms for performing many tasks (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). In small business, the management of resources requires prudent use of finances and tangible assets, while relying heavily upon the knowledge and skills of the owner (Fiore et al., 2013). Small firms use outsourcing to compensate for areas of deficit related to resources, knowledge, or skill.

Accounting operations and technology support are viable business elements to outsource, alleviating the owner's need to dedicate unnecessary resources; however, marketing, especially in microbusiness, is about relationships, which cannot be outsourced (Gronroos, 2012).

Relationship building, also noted as influential in small business success, cannot be outsourced, requiring the diligent involvement of the owner (Abou-Moghli & Al-Kasasbeh, 2012; Awuah & Reintert, 2012). The familiarity of the business owner with the consumer enhances their ability to understand and address the customer's needs (Petkovska, 2015). Studying customer engagement, Sashi (2012) offered that understanding how to engage customers increases value for both business owner and consumer. The process from connection to engagement moves through seven steps (Sashi, 2012), requiring the commitment of time and self from the business owner, but the return on investment deems it a value added exercise.

In order to achieve success, marketing must be integrated into the decision-making, and ultimately into operations (Kumar, 2015). Despite the importance of marketing, Cronin-Gilmore (2012) argued that a conflict exists between what a small business owner should do and what actually occurs. Studying the use of strategic marketing plans within small firms, Izvercianu and Miclea (2015) emphasized that small firm marketing relies upon the instinct of the owner and is reactionary to the presence of a threat or opportunity.

Firm performance improves through marketing innovation (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2012; Rubera & Kirca, 2012). Providing both tangible and intangible

benefits, marketing activities often lose priority in the planning process (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2012; Rubera & Kirca, 2012). The growing complexity of the market environment presents adaptation challenges for resource-constrained small firms (Fiore et al., 2013), and Morgan (2012) offered that understanding the role of marketing in firm survival needs further research. The limitations of SMEs define their marketing activities (Haniff & Halim, 2014), and Harrigan et al. (2011) added that SMEs need simple, inexpensive, and efficient marketing approaches. Sixty-five percent of small business owners lack the necessary knowledge to manage their marketing (Looney & Ryerson, 2011). A need exists to provide practical, evidence-based solutions to address the persistent problem of small business failure (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Lilien, 2011).

Transition

Section 1 included the purpose of the study, providing background and the specific problem that this study sought to address. In this section, I also proposed a qualitative methodology with case study design to guide the study process. In the literature review, I discussed the current challenges that exist within the small business segment, starting with a review of theories related to marketing and small business. The rest of the literature review included an overview of the definitions used to describe the small business segment, small business failure, and the discrepancies related to success and failure factors for small business.

Section 2 included the purpose of the study and provided detailed descriptions of the research study process including the research methodology and design, the population and sampling technique, and the data collection process and instruments. Section 3

reviewed the purpose statements and the research question that provided the foundation for this study, included a presentation of the interview findings, and discussed the relationship of the findings to small business literature and the conceptual frameworks used to structure this study. Section 3 concludes with an application to professional practice, implications for social change, and recommendations for action.

Section 2: The Project

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. The failure rate of small business, specifically microbusiness, has remained unaffected by small business research, as only one out of two small businesses survives beyond 5 years. The success of microbusinesses affects individuals, families, and communities, and their continued survival is crucial to economic stability. In Section 2, I revisit the research purpose and process, including (a) a discussion on the chosen methodology and why it was chosen over other options, (b) a description of the role of the researcher, (c) a discussion of the data collection instruments and techniques, (d) a description of the data analysis process, and (e) a discussion of the reliability of the instruments to be used and their validity for this study.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. Four active microbusiness retail store owners from Delaware participated in semistructured interviews focused on their processes for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. The implication for positive social change includes an enriched understanding of the market orientation of microbusiness owners through depth of detail (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) as well as practical and effective marketing research for individuals considering microbusiness start-up and those who support microbusiness

through policy and education (Lilien, 2011). The business implications include improved firm performance for current microbusiness owners.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative studies, the role of the researcher is to serve as the data collection instrument (Leedy & Ormond, 2013). Fulfilling the role of the researcher required that I gain a better understanding of the research topic through immersion in the literature.

From the literature, I formulated the research question and the interview questions based on related studies in small business and marketing.

The potential for bias exists through subjective reactions to the interview responses (Sangasubana, 2011). My experience within the small business segment created the potential for bias. According to Yin (2014), Balzacq (2014), and Petty et al. (2012) validating interview data with additional sources helps to minimize bias as well as clear explanation for participant selection, data collection methods, and researcher interpretations (Swafford, 2014). For the purpose of this study, I triangulated the interview data with field notes and documents, company and Internet, to help minimize subjective influences. Triangulation involving multiple methods for data collection, or methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012), provided opportunity for information from one data source to confirm the information provided by another source (Barusch et al., 2011; Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012). Interview responses were the initial data source for this study. For triangulation purposes, the design of the interview questions supported elicitation of responses related to customer and competitor data collection, budgetary support for marketing activities as well as chosen marketing venues (ads, social media,

websites) and resource involvement. Based on the interview responses, I used observation and additional documents, company and Internet, to triangulate the data in this study and minimize bias.

As the researcher, I had ethical obligations to the participants. The Belmont Report protocol (Mikesell, Bromley, & Khodyakov, 2013; Greaney et al., 2012) outlines the ethical obligations of researchers, emphasizing (a) respect for the research participants, (b) obligation of the researcher to minimize harm while maximizing benefits, and (c) equal treatment based on individual need, effort, contribution, and merit (Mikesell et al., 2013; Greeney et al., 2012). In alignment with these principles, the purpose of this study was to provide educational information gathered through adherence to the highest ethical standards, promoting benefit and minimizing risk to the participants. The informed consent process, detailed in later paragraphs, contained the specifics of participant involvement

Following approval, I used the local chambers of commerce and professional contacts to compose a list of microbusiness owners who fit the study criteria and gathered available contact information, both electronic and nonelectronic. Using the contact information provided, I began to contact retail microbusiness owners in the Delaware region. I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the study, and requested their participation in the study. According to Yin (2014), having a minimum of two cases provides a stronger effect than that of a single case, supporting the potential for replication or contrast. I used an abridged interview protocol (see Appendix C) with open-ended questions to explore the marketing orientation of microbusiness retail store

owners. The use of an interview protocol supported consistency in the interview process (Hunter, 2012; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). As used by other researchers in SME studies, semistructured, face-to-face interviews assisted in exploring the participants' experiences (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Parry, 2012; Pistol & Bucea-Manea, 2014). The face-to-face interview process, as explained by Cronin-Gilmore (2012), supported relationship development between participants and researcher, providing an opportunity for greater depth of response.

Participants

The research question that provided the foundation for this study focused on the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners to monitor, collect, and transform marketing data into operational marketing activities. Consequently, all participants were owners of a retail business and oversaw the marketing activities within their firm. I used the local chambers of commerce as well as professional relationships to gather a group of participants who met the specified criteria. The contact information provided included emails, addresses, and telephone numbers. Using this information, I contacted 30 microbusiness retail store owners in the area who met the criteria, explained the purpose of the study, and requested their participation. Six potential candidates responded that they were willing to participate in the study, but I reached data saturation with four. As the study involved a very specific group of individuals, there are certain circumstances when only two or three participants, purposefully sampled based on the criteria set forth in the study, are necessary (O'Donnell, 2014; Yin, 2014). Purposive sampling, focused on shared characteristics relevant to the research question, is appropriate for use in small,

detailed studies (O'Donnell, 2014; Petty et al., 2012; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013), increasing the probability that the participants have satisfactory familiarity with the subject matter (Rocker, Young, Donahue, Farquhar, & Simpson, 2012). Intending to interview all willing participants until data saturation occurred, I did not prioritize the participants, but rather their availability determined the order in which the interviews took place.

Relationship development requires a shared understanding of purpose and expectations (Ward, 2013), which developed as I explained the purpose of the study, the interview process, and answered questions prior to the start of the interview. In addition, Jacob and Furgerson (2012) offered that starting the interview process with relevant background questions supports the initiation of relationship building, providing the participant time to acclimate to the process. As recommended by Schaupp (2014), I conducted the interviews at the convenience of the participants to further support relationship building. Creating an environment that supports open communication promotes relationship building and encourages the provision of greater depth of detail (Powell & Eddleston, 2013).

The collection of accurate and truthful data necessitates alleviating participant concerns regarding disclosure of sensitive information (Adinoff, Conley, Taylor, & Chezem, 2012). Confidentiality is an essential aspect of the research design (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012), and Yin (2014) recommended that to support confidentiality, the findings be aggregated rather than reported individually. An in-depth explanation of aspects of the process to participants, and ensuring their comfort level, supported the

development of a collaborative relationship. I made them aware that I would maintain a password protected and encrypted hard drive to store the collected data, keep it for 5 years after conducting the study, and destroy the data at the end of the 5 years. If they requested it, I would provide the participants with a condensed summary of the study results.

Research Method and Design

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. The level of detail desired, in addition to the various research elements included or excluded, determined the appropriate method and design for this study. While several options for both research method and design exist, as detailed in the following paragraphs, a qualitative method with a multiple case study design best supported the purpose of this study.

Research Method

There exists an increasing need for research that provides practical solutions to business problems. In providing these practical solutions, researchers have three research methods from which to choose: quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods. A quantitative method uses objective measures and statistical analysis to produce computable results (Kisely & Kendall, 2011), providing numeric representations of relationships between dependent and independent variables (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Quantitative methods require a larger sample population that is more representative of the population to which the study findings apply (Denzin 2012). Qualitative methods allow

for the use of small, purposely chosen sample populations to support the exploration of participant experience and perception (Petty et al., 2012). Using a variety of data sources, including observations, interviews, documents, and other sources, qualitative methods enable the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of a complex issue (Houghton et al., 2013). While qualitative and quantitative methods cannot validate one another, the combination in a mixed methods approach can benefit from integration of their respective strengths (Edwards & Dardis, 2014; Watkins, 2012); however, Denzin (2012) argued ambiguity in the advantage of using mixed methods approach when compared with the others.

The objective of the research should guide the methodology most appropriate (Srivastava & Thomson, 2009). Prior researchers (Bodlaj & Rojsek 2014; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; O'Donnell, 2014) used qualitative methods to study small firm marketing, citing their ability to gain deeper insight into subject matter. The exploratory nature of this study, coupled with a small sample size and complex nature of microbusiness, lent itself to a qualitative approach.

Research Design

Qualitative methodology provides several key design options including (a) ethnography, (b) case study, and (c) phenomenology (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Ethnography provides detailed descriptions of lived experience through the researcher's immersion in the culture they are studying (Sangasubana, 2011). This design uses multiple data collection methods for triangulation including observation, interviews, and archival data (Sangasubana, 2011). Ethnography involves exploration of

social phenomena, inclusion of unstructured data, use of small sample sizes, explicit interpretation of meanings, and observation over extended periods (McCabe & Holmes, 2014; Vannini, 2015). Observations that occur over an extended period of time help expose variations in data, not captured by other qualitative measures (Platt, Crothers, & Horgan, 2012).

A phenomenological design supports the exploration of lived experiences of a small sample population through observation and interview (Irvine et al., 2013). The primary focus of phenomenology is gathering rich, in-depth information with a secondary focus on the analysis of the information gathered (Gee, Loewenthal, & Cayne, 2013). The human experience is a valuable source of information, providing new insights and perspectives communicated through the details of a lived event (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Using a very small sample or number of cases, case study design involves in-depth exploration (Verner & Abdullah, 2012), resulting in rich and comprehensive detail (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Case studies take into account various perspectives including the individual or group, observing the interactions around them, and the context in which they occur (Cronin, 2014). The process for a case study unfolds in alignment with the data analysis and provides the researcher with flexibility to modify aspects of the study, as appropriate (Cronin, 2014). Practice-focused research uses qualitative case studies (Baillie et al., 2014). Found in the research of Cronin-Gilmore (2012) and Bodlaj and Rojsek (2014), case study approach provided the context in which to explore marketing activities of small business owners.

Ethnography and phenomenological designs contain a variety of elements that enrich the qualitative research process. This study did not include cultural immersion, theory construction, or lived experiences related to a particular phenomenon. A multiple case study design enables the researcher to explore differences between cases, providing greater depth of detail and the elements needed to support the research study (Dagger & Danaher, 2014; Bock & Larson, 2013; Zhou, Li, Bosworth, Ehiri, & Luo, 2013), making a multiple case study design the appropriate forum for this study.

Difficult to objectify, data saturation is vital to the quality and content validity of qualitative research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Sample size determination for qualitative research is important in ensuring that the researcher gathers a comprehensive range of information and viewpoints on the study topic (Yin, 2014). Historically, data saturation occurs when new information ceased introduction (Jones et al., 2013a) and when the level of detail provided enables replication of the study (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012). In their study on entrepreneurial marketing, Jones et al. (2013a) interviewed eight participants but found no new information emerged after six interviews. Using seven participants, O'Donnell (2014) studied networking and small business marketing, concluding that data saturation may occur after as few as two participants. Discussing saturation, Francis et al. (2010) stressed the importance of two principles: initial analysis sample, which defines the minimum number of interviews conducted, and stopping criterion, which defines the number of additional interviews that will occur to ensure no emergence of new themes (Francis et al., 2010). The literature lacks a definitive formula for determining appropriate sample size in qualitative studies but

rather focuses on two issues, redundancy and saturation (Francis et al., 2010; Trotter, 2012; Walker, 2012). Though semantic differences exist, both redundancy and saturation involve the point at which no new information, coding, or themes are produced (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Trotter, 2012; Walker, 2012).

For a multiple case study, Yin (2014) posited that as few as two cases might be appropriate for replication within a noncomplex study (O'Donnell, 2014). For the purpose of this study, I planned to use a sample population of five microbusiness retail store owners; however, saturation determined the stopping point, which occurred after three interviews, confirmed when the fourth interview produced no new information. As used in the work of prior researchers (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Jones et al., 2013a), I used a semistructured interview process, allowing for open-ended questions. A semistructured interview process promotes the provision of detailed responses from which the emergence of meaning can occur (Kisely & Kendall, 2011).

Population and Sampling

The study selection criterion resulted from personal experiences in small business finance. As a professional within the small business sector, I interact with small business owners on a regular basis; however, to address potential conflicts of interest, the participants existed outside my current client base. The majority of employer firms in Delaware have fewer than 20 employees, which is characteristic of 90% of the small business segment throughout the United States (Headd, 2010). I used purposive sampling in order to support shared characteristics for variables considered influential in business operations including size, involvement of owner as operator, industry type, and economic

environment (Iskandarsyah et al., 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). In this study, I focused on the MO of microbusiness retail store owners, which specified the sample population as being a retail business owner who manages all aspects of their business marketing activities. In practice-oriented research, participants are experts related to their own experience with the study problem (Rocker et al., 2012). Purposeful sampling ensures that the participants are contextually appropriate to the purpose of the study and the research question (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Jones et al., 2013; O'Donnell, 2014).

Exploring the concept of disruptive marketing in the nonprofit sector, Kirchner, Ford, and Mottner (2012) used five participants and an in-depth, semistructured interview process. In their study on entrepreneurial marketing, Jones et al. (2013) interviewed eight participants but found no new information emerged after six interviews. In 2014, O'Donnell used seven participants in a study on networking and small business marketing, offering that data saturation may occur after as few as two participants. For a non-complex multiple case study, Yin (2014) posited that as few as two cases might be appropriate for replication (O'Donnell, 2014).

Historically, data saturation reached achievement when continued gathering of information provided no new insights (Francis et al., 2010). This subjective approach has resulted in a variety of sample sizes deemed appropriate for saturation throughout qualitative research. Multiple suggestions exist regarding the minimum number of participants needed, ranging from five to 50 (Dworking, 2012), and O'Donnell (2014) provided a range of two to 15. Two key elements in determining saturation include initial

analysis sample and stopping criterion (Francis, 2010), and Yin (2014) added that the context of replications determines the sample size, as a simple multiple case design may need as few as two cases. The premise of this study is not complex; however, it is specific. For the purpose of this study, I planned to use a sample population of five microbusiness retail store owners; however, saturation determined the stopping point prior to the use of five participants.

This study focused on the MO of microbusiness retail store owners. The sample population includes microbusiness retail store owners who monitor and collect information related to their consumers and competitors and then transform the gathered information into operational marketing activities. Utilizing the expertise of prior researchers (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012; Schaupp & Belanger, 2014; & Ward, 2013), I conducted the interviews at a time and place convenient for the participant, ensuring a conducive and safe atmosphere for both parties. I explained the purpose of the study, the process involved, the business owner's role, and answered any questions that arose prior to starting the interview. Additionally, I started the interviews with questions related to relevant background information to put them at ease.

Ethical Research

All researchers have ethical responsibility to ensure respect for and protection of research participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Several theoretical perspectives exist related to ethics, and Stacey and Stacey (2012) contended that research ethics is evolutionary, adapting and reflecting the dynamic nature of the time. To heighten my awareness and knowledge regarding the ethical treatment of research participants, I

completed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) web-based training course on “Protecting Human Research Participants.” To further ensure compliance with high ethical standards, my study proposal underwent review by and received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), reference 12-18-15-0293409.

Informed consent is critical, taking into consideration the socio-cultural related issues and appreciation for participant perspectives as well as determining the comprehension of the research (Naanyu, Some, & Siika, 2014). The key concept contained within informed consent is the demonstration of understanding on the part of the participant related to the effects of providing data (Nunan & Yenicioğlu, 2013). Considering these factors, provision of written and verbal explanation of the process is important. The consent form (see Appendix B) provided a clear explanation of the process, including all efforts made to protect the privacy of the participant.

I gathered pertinent business demographic data and did not use any identifiable data when writing the study’s conclusion. The consent form included assurances related to the protection of all identifying data. For the purpose of this study, participant identity was protected through the use of pseudonyms. All data is securely stored in an encrypted electronic filing system for a 5-year period. I did not use any third parties during any part of this process, making a nondisclosure agreement unnecessary.

The focus of this study was on the marketing activities used by successful microbusiness owners in the retail industry. The written study excluded information of a personal nature, minimizing potential harm to the participant. The purpose was to learn from the shared thematic concepts in order to increase the knowledge of others within the

microbusiness segment of the small business sector. Risk always exists, but it can be mitigated by ensuring an understanding of the research purpose and adhering to that purpose. In addition, Wallace and Sheldon (2015) offered that the implementation of a comprehensive informed consent process supports the mitigation of risk. As a required part of this research process, I have included an all-inclusive informed consent form. The benefit of increasing the microbusiness success rate, related to the intent of this study, outweighs the minimal risk involved. The risk of unknowingly including a potentially vulnerable individual is always present. The purpose of this study was not intentionally inclusive of any of the aforementioned factors, nor was it designed to bring attention to this aspect. As such, there were no known risks inherent to this study.

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. As part of the informed consent process, participants received notice regarding their right to withdraw at any point during the consent or study process. The options for withdrawal notification included email, telephone call, and face-to-face conversation. I did not employ any incentives in the participant recruitment process.

Data Collection

For this study, I used the three principles of data collection as proposed by Yin (2014) to guide this part of the process. I discuss each principle within the appropriate section or subsection to include multiple data sources, case study database, and chain of evidence. This section provides detail regarding the data collection instruments, the technique for collection, and the organization process.

Instruments

The strength of qualitative research lies in its ability to capture comprehensive detail (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). Semistructured interviews are an effective method for asking questions that require reflection (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Sandy & Dumay, 2011). In alignment with the purpose and design of this study, Kisely and Kendall (2011) supported the use of a semistructured interview process, which promotes the ability to gather in-depth details from the participant. The researcher, as the data collector, bears responsibility for the totality of the data (Leedy & Ormond, 2013), and as the primary tool for data collection, the researcher's ability to facilitate interaction with the participants promotes the depth of detail (Pezalla, Pettigrew, & Miller-Day, 2012). For this multiple case study, I was the primary data collection instrument, conducting audio-recorded, face-to-face interviews and using an abridged interview protocol (see Appendix C) to assist with the process.

While interviews are a fundamental component of the case study design (Yin, 2014), there are additional sources of evidence for case studies including documentation, archival records, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; Denzin, 2012). The first principle in the data collection process is the use of multiple sources (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Yin, 2014). Triangulation requires the utilization of multiple data sources and provides the researcher with a more detailed viewpoint (Balzacq, 2014; Petty et al., 2012; & Myers, 2013; Wahyuni, 2012). Interview responses were the initial data source for this study. The design of the interview questions supported elicitation of responses related to

various mechanisms used by the retail microbusiness owner to determine their marketing activities. In addition to the interviews, transcriptions, observations, field notes, and Internet documents provided additional sources of data for triangulation and helped to minimize bias.

Establishing the credibility of the data helps to measure reliability and validity (Kisely & Kendall, 2011). Consistency in the data collection process is essential to determining credibility, and in turn, reliability and validity (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). The third principle involves maintaining a chain of evidence (Yin, 2014). The premise is that an outside observer should be able to trace the researcher's steps from research question to findings, and vice versa (Yin, 2014). This required extensive notes and strict attention to detail. Discussed further in reliability and validity, I adhered to this principle throughout the process.

In addition, the abridged interview protocol (see Appendix C) helps to maintain consistency in the interview process (Hunter, 2012; Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). I used the abridged interview protocol for every interview and in the same manner, to ensure consistency in the process. Following the completion of the interview, I used software based technology to transcribe the audio recordings and reviewed the transcription against my notes and the recordings. I entered the responses into Excel, placing each interview question on a different sheet in the Excel workbook and entering all responses to each question on the corresponding sheet for ease of comparison. I assigned an identifier to each participant, MB-1 to MB-4, in the same order that the interviews

occurred. After I coded all the data and no new themes emerged, I performed member checking.

Member checking, or respondent validation, provides participants with the opportunity to correct inaccuracies or clarify any misrepresentations in the interpreted data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Reilly, 2013). Member checking should occur as soon as possible following the interview (Houghton et al., 2013), and Reilly (2013) added that member checking allows participants the opportunity to provide supplementary or clarifying information; however, McConnell-Henry, Chapman, and Francis (2011) cautioned researchers to carefully consider member checking, stating that clarification of responses should occur during the interview process in order to minimize the participants' re-consideration of their responses. In order to provide the participants with opportunity for review, correction, and confirmation of the interpretations (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; McConnell-Henry et al., 2011), I used member checking, as each participant was given a transcript summary that included my thematic interpretations to ensure accuracy of their intended meaning.

Collection Technique

Interviews are an effective and important data collection technique available within the qualitative method (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Sandy & Dumay, 2011). The benefit of qualitative research is its ability to adapt as the research develops, allowing gathered data to guide further data collection (Bansal & Corley, 2012). Semistructured interviews provide participants with the opportunity to answer questions and offer information in their own way (Sandy & Dumay, 2011), while providing the researcher

the ability to focus on the central research question (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I used a semistructured process with an abridged interview protocol (see Appendix C) to facilitate the process and collect data via face-to-face interviews. This process gave voice to the participants (Sørensen, Østrup, Tewes, & Uhrenfeldt, 2014), as microbusiness retail store owners who monitor, collect, and transform market data into marketing activities and was appropriate to the purpose of the study, as it promoted flexibility in the progression of the interview (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014; Parry, 2012). Taking into consideration the advice of Knight (2012), I used follow-up questions during the interview in order to explore the interview responses and gain greater depth of detail.

Published in 2012, Jacob and Furgerson provided eight helpful tips for planning and conducting an interview. These steps, expounded upon in the data analysis subsection below, provide the basis for the abridged interview protocol found in appendix C. The authors (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) contended that researchers, especially those new to the interviewing process, often have difficulty with staying focused and ensuring consistency between interviews, supporting the use of a consistent protocol. In alignment with Jacob and Furgerson (2012), the interview protocol contains scripting to address important interview elements for the researcher to review with every participant, including the informed consent process. I used the abridged interview protocol to guide the interview process. In addition, Lamb (2013) recommended the use of a research journal for note-taking, and Jacob and Furgerson (2012) emphasized a heavier reliance on audio recording in order to remain engaged in the interview process. I used an audio

recorder to record the interviews and took notes on the interview protocol form to capture key ideas or concepts that needed clarification or expansion of thought.

In addition to the audio-recorded interviews, I used the interview transcriptions, field notes, observations, and Internet documentation referenced in the interview responses to triangulate the data in this study. While the credibility of the study requires the provision of extensive detail, qualitative methods promote flexibility in the process for data collection and analysis (Bansal & Corley, 2012). The participant responses, both verbal and non-verbal, can provide insight into additional data sources appropriate for data triangulation (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Carter et al., 2014; Wahyuni, 2014). Exploring non-traditional marketing activities in SMEs, Bettioli et al. (2012) used in-depth interviews, direct observations, and secondary source information, consisting of company documents, websites, and articles, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. In their study on translational research organizations, Zhou et al. (2013) utilized multiple Internet search engines to review secondary sources as applicable to the study. As appropriate to this study, I used Internet documents including websites, social media sites, Internet advertising, and other Internet based documents that exposed the activities in which the retail microbusiness owner participated as part of their marketing activities.

Organization Technique

Data organization in qualitative studies presents a challenge, emphasizing the importance of determining a system (Watkins, 2012). The second principle of data collection offered by Yin (2014) involves the creation of a case study database. The data

gathered in this study included audio-recorded interviews, interview transcriptions, field notes, observations, and Internet data sources. The small sample population and singular purpose of this study made the use of Excel a viable option for data organization and analysis. The recommendation from Yin (2014), and also used in a marketing study by Cronin-Gilmore (2012), is that the researcher maintains two database files: one for the interview data and one for all of the evidence gathered during the study. I created a parent file for each participant with two sub-files, one for the interview data and one for the additional documentation. After each interview, the audio-recordings were transcribed, and, along with the field notes, observations, and additional documents, were organized, labeled, and stored in the appropriate file within the database.

The complexity of the data gathered in a case study may provide difficulty in the use of computer assisted analysis software (Yin, 2014). In 2014, Imachukwu used Excel to organize data in a study on cultural differences in the workplace. In 2013, Bouges utilized Excel for data organization in a study on Saudi family firms and small business internationalization. Excel is a low-cost and effective alternative to other software options, easy to organize and practical for data analysis (Watson, 2012). Taken together, these studies promoted the ability of Excel to support the data analysis process in this study.

In order to protect the confidentiality of the participants, I removed all identifying information prior to filing the data. To ensure consistent organization of data, I used MB-1 to identify the first participant, progressing the numbers for each additional participant. I labeled and saved all interviews documentation in the following manner: MB-1-

Interview, MB-1-Transcription, MB-1-Field Notes, MB-1-Observations, and MB-1-Internet documents, progressing the numbers in the same manner as the parent file for each participant. This process promoted protection of privacy and consistency in organization. I securely stored information in a password protected and encrypted electronic filing system, where it will remain for a 5-year period. I will digitally shred all files at the end of the 5 years.

Data Analysis

Studying small business marketing strategies, Cronin-Gilmore (2012) referenced the analysis process as intuitive and interpretive, purposeful in finding shared themes in data. I used the eight analysis steps provided by Cronin-Gilmore (2012) and derived from Yin (2005) to guide the exploration of interview data for shared themes and concepts. The eight steps are (a) listening to the audio recordings and reading each transcription to solidify familiarity with each interview (Harrigan et al., 2012), (b) creating an individual thematic code for each transcribed interview, (c) creating an individual code descriptor list for each transcribed interview, (d) comparing individualized code lists and then creating one final code list, (e) creating a theme dictionary, (f) totaling codes (g) applying codes to themes, and (h) summarizing themes related to interview questions. I utilized Excel for the organization, coding, and analysis aspects of the study, similar to other research studies (Bouges, 2013; Emrich, 2015; & Imachukwu, 2014), as it provided the capabilities necessary to analyze and compile shared themes presented in the data.

The coding process provided a means for data analysis and development of detail. For the purpose of this study, I summarized the themes in relationship to market

orientation, the conceptual framework used for this study, and the related concepts found in the literature review. The literature review continued throughout the study, to include any new studies published since the writing of the proposal. The goal of analysis was to arrive at themes and patterns, reflective of shared marketing practices among retail microbusiness owners.

Data triangulation occurs when more than one source of evidence supports the findings of the study (Denzin, 2012; Yin, 2014). Appropriate sources of evidence for data triangulation may include but is not limited to observations, notes, company records, and Internet documents (Carter et al., 2014; Lamb, 2013; Uusitalo, 2014; Yin, 2014). In addition to the audio-recorded, semistructured interviews, I used observations, field notes, and Internet documentation for data triangulation. The merging of the various sources of evidence helps support the construct validity of a qualitative study (Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2014), and data consistency results from having multiple sources for verification (Sangasubana, 2011).

Reliability and Validity

The quality of qualitative research cannot be measured in the same terms as quantitative research (Houghton, Casy, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). The assessment of reliability and validity is important to preserving the credibility of the data (Kisely & Kendall, 2011), and Leedy and Ormrod (2013) added that consistency in the data collection process is essential to establishing the reliability and validity. In qualitative research, there exists debate over the roles of validity, reliability, and generalizability (O'Brien, Harris, Beckman, Reed, & Cook, 2014), as the premise or defining elements of

these terms fail to coalesce with the qualitative methodology. In qualitative research, the terms reliability and validity are replaced with dependability and credibility (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014), as data capture and analysis in qualitative research relies upon mechanisms that differ from quantitative research (Foley & O'Conner, 2013).

Reliability

While reliability and validity are used in quantitative research, rigor in qualitative research supports confidence in the findings of a qualitative study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Rigor ensures that the research methodology and design are in alignment with the research purpose, and that the research process maintains attention to every detail (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). Rigor includes four elements: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Barusch et al., 2011; Petty et al., 2012; Watkins, 2012).

For this study, I employed several strategies to support the reliability of the findings including data triangulation (Lamb, 2013; Uusitalo, 2014; Yin, 2014), member checking (Barusch et al., 2011; Bekhet & Zauszniewski, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2011), and chain of evidence through provision of detailed description (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Yin, 2014). Reliability emphasizes the accuracy of procedures (Inacio & Gimenez, 2012) and determines the ability of researchers to replicate quantitative findings (Watkins, 2012). In qualitative studies, a researcher can replicate the method or design, but the data collection process involves subjectivity related to researcher reflexivity,

participant responses, and environmental factors that do not support replication (Darawsheh & Stanley, 2014).

For qualitative research, the analogous criterion to reliability is termed transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), denoting the ability to apply the findings in other contexts. Transferability, an element of rigor, involves the capacity to apply the findings in a similar situation or context (Houghton et al., 2013). A key strategy for supporting transferability is providing an in-depth description for the readers (Carter et al., 2014). The reader needs a thorough description of the original nature of the study in order to make an informed decision regarding its applicability, or transferability, to their situation (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Using a chain of evidence, I maintained detailed descriptions of the process and findings.

Triangulation, as originally defined by Denzin in 1978, involved the integration of methodologies for studying the same phenomena (Denzin, 2012). Triangulation occurring within a single method is limited by the construct of the single methodology (Denzin, 2012), necessitating the collection of data from multiple sources to verify the findings (Barusch, et al., 2011; Yu, Abdullah, & Saat, 2014). I used audio-recorded interviews, interview transcriptions, observations, field notes, and Internet documents for data triangulation.

Member checking is also an appropriate technique for determining the dependability, or stability, of the data (Barusch et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2014; Houghton et al., 2013). While the researcher is encouraged to clarify responses during the interview process (McConnell-Henry et al., 2011), I used member checking, enabling participants

to review a summarized transcript of the interview with my thematic interpretations. This process supports the confirmation of intended meaning (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Validity

The rigor of a study interweaves, as the transferability of the research findings is dependent upon credibility, which is reliant on the dependability and confirmability (Petty et al., 2012). Validity, according to Inacio and Gimenez (2012), references how well a test measures the intended elements. In qualitative studies, credibility parallels the validity of quantitative studies and supports the value and plausibility of the findings (Houghton et al., 2013). Researchers provided three key techniques for assessing the credibility of the findings: (a) independent reviews, (b) member checking, and (c) triangulation (Kisely & Kendall, 2011; Yin, 2014).

Member checking provides opportunity to determine the dependability, or stability, of the data (Barusch et al., 2011; Houghton et al., 2013). I used member checking by providing the participants with transcription summaries and my thematic interpretations for review, correction, and confirmation. Member checking, according to Houghton et al. (2013), should occur as soon as possible following transcription, and Reilly (2013) added that member checking allows participants the opportunity to provide supplementary or clarifying information that may be inspired by the review of their transcribed interview.

In addition, confirmability requires an audit trail and reflexivity, including descriptions of the decisions made throughout the research process (Houghton et al., 2013). While the reader may disagree with the conclusions of the researcher, they need to

understand the decisions that resulted in the findings (Barusch et al., 2011; Houghton et al., 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Though cited by Yin (2014) for its support of reliability, a detailed chain of evidence also helps promote confirmability by providing in-depth documentation. Achievement of understanding occurs through the depth of detail. My notes were extensive throughout this process, and I have provided depth of detail with regards to the (a) research process and procedures, (b) data collection and analysis, and (c) database development.

Transition and Summary

Practical problems need research studies that focus on providing practical solutions. Section 2 included (a) the purpose for the study, (b) the chosen research methodology and design, and (c) the sample population. Section 2 also included a discussion on (a) the ethical considerations, (b) my role in the research process, (c) the data collection instruments and techniques for collection and organization, (d) the process for data analysis, and (e) the reliability and validity of the instruments. This study focused on microbusiness owners who represent more than 60% of the small business sector in the United States (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). This multiple case study design enabled me to explore differences between cases, providing greater depth of detail and the elements needed to support this research study.

Section 3 begins with a review of this study's purpose, questions, and an overview of the findings. The findings integrated the conceptual framework used to support the study. As this study is an applied research study, the ultimate goal was to affect professional practice and to increase the potential for social change. Section 3

concludes with recommendations for action and reflections on this research study and its implications for social change.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by microbusiness retail store owners for collecting, monitoring, and transforming market data into operational marketing activities. Section 3 includes a presentation of the findings and the impact on professional, social, and academic practice in relation to the research question and conceptual framework of the study. Discussion of the findings also includes rich description of the themes that emerged from the study.

Using professional and personal contacts as laid out in the research proposal, I contacted 30 retail microbusiness owners in Sussex County, Delaware. Of the 30, six responded, agreeing to participate in the study. An abridged interview protocol guided the audio-recorded, semistructured interview process. Following the informed consent process, I asked each participant three background questions and eight focus questions (see Appendix B). Saturation of data occurred after three interviews, confirmed when the fourth interview produced no new information. After transcribing the interviews, member checking occurred, as I provided each participant with a summary of the interview, along with my thematic interpretations to ensure accurate capture of their intended meaning. I triangulated the data using the audio-recordings, transcriptions, observations, field notes, and Internet documents and used Microsoft Excel to organize and analyze the data. From the coded data, three main themes emerged: (a) role of business owner as marketing instrument, (b) human capital, time and self, and (c) relationships and networking.

Presentation of the Findings

This study was guided by the following research question: What mechanisms do retail microbusiness owners use to collect, monitor, and transform data into operational marketing activities? Using audio-recorded, semistructured interviews, I explored the research question, gaining an understanding of how retail microbusiness owners approached marketing activities. In addition to the semistructured interviews, I used multiple Internet search engines to gather information related to their marketing activities discussed during the interviews, such as company websites, use of social media, industry related participation, and community involvement. The audio-recorded interviews, transcriptions, observations, field notes, and Internet documentation allowed for triangulation of the data. All of the interviews lasted less than 1 hour, and I conducted the interviews at the time and location of the participant's choosing. While the participants all conducted their business within a small geographical area, each business owner had a different niche within the retail industry.

Following each interview, I listened to the audio-recordings and reviewed my field notes. Using Transcribe, a software based program, I transcribed the responses and entered them into Excel. I placed each interview question on a different sheet in the Excel workbook and entered all responses to each question on the corresponding sheet for ease of comparison. I assigned an identifier to each participant, MB-1 to MB-4, in the same order that the interviews occurred. After I coded all the data and no new themes emerged, I performed member checking, providing each participant with a transcribed summary to

include my thematic interpretations inferred from the data in order to ensure accuracy towards their intent.

The interviews provided the largest source of data with saturation occurring after three interviews, confirmed when the fourth interview produced no new information. I entered all the data into Excel and reviewed the transcribed responses, observations, field notes, and Internet documents. I developed codes from the key ideas and was able to organize all coded data into broader categories. From the categories, three themes emerged. These themes were (a) use of business owner as marketing instrument, (b) human capital, time and self, and (c) relationships and networking.

The conceptual framework for this research study was MO. In small business, MO represents the ability of the business owner to assimilate customer, competitor, and industry related information into effective marketing activities. Prior research offered that business owners with high levels of MO experienced higher levels of success than those with low levels of MO. I developed the questions for this research to specifically target the mechanisms used by retail microbusiness owners to collect, monitor, and transform data into marketing activities. Before discussing the themes that emerged from this study and their relationship to the conceptual framework and literature review, I will provide an overview of the participants and the marketing venues, traditional and nontraditional, used by each.

Participants

In an effort to maintain participant confidentiality, I assigned each participant an identifier: MB-1, MB-2, MB-3, and MB-4. Prior to starting the interviews, I reviewed the

informed consent as part of the interview protocol and answered any remaining questions. All participants agreed to have their interview audio-recorded.

Participant 1: MB-1. MB-1 founded, owned, and operated a local cycling shop that sold a variety of bikes and cycling supplies as well as provided fitting and repair services. The company opened in 2011 and had two employees, the owner and one part-time employee. MB-1 reported consistent growth in the company's profitability, displaying a recently purchased piece of technological equipment that would expand the company's scope of service and enhance the customer experience.

Participant 2: MB-2. MB-2 purchased his business in 2009 but restructured it to align with his interests in the race car industry. Selling automotive and race car parts, MB-2 also provided some repair and maintenance services. Just as MB-1, MB-2 had two employees, himself and one part-time employee. MB-2 also reported consistent growth in profitability, claiming his gross income in 2015 to be 7 times higher than 2009.

Participant 3: MB-3. Also having started her business in 2009, MB-3 sold office supplies and marketing products. This aligned with her background, having worked in the print industry with newspapers and marketing materials. MB-3 reported having no additional employees and, like MB-1 and MB-2, reported continued growth, as she was getting ready to expand her business but was indefinite as to the specifics.

Participant 4: MB-4. MB-4 owned a store that sold specialty desserts made fresh on site. He reported having one other full time employee and subcontractors who worked for short periods during the holiday season. His professional background was in real estate, for which marketing was a significant aspect of his role. Just as the other three,

MB-4 reported continued growth, as 2015 finished with a 27% increase over 2014 and 2014 was 23% higher than 2013.

Traditional and nontraditional marketing. All four participants reported the use of at least one social media venue for marketing purposes, and three out of four had a website. Social media marketing venues can camouflage the marketing limitations of SMEs, enhancing their ability to focus on opportunity and customer-knowledge (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). None of participants used any traditional media venues, specifically print, radio, or television ads, as a primary marketing tool for their business but rather in sponsorship of other community or industry related groups or events. Two of the four participants expressed having spent “several hundred dollars” on a traditional ad campaign, and both reported no measurable return on the investment (MB-1-transcription; MB-2-transcription). Even MB-3, whose business involved marketing materials, opted to use nontraditional venues for her own marketing. While studying WOM, Fredericks (2011) reported a decline in the use of traditional marketing venues, and Preechanont and Lu (2013) emphasized the dependence of small business owners on alternative marketing options.

Emergent Theme 1: Role of Business Owner as Marketing Instrument

Business owner as market data collector. The concept of MO emphasizes that the input of customers should influence the marketing activities of the business (Achrol & Gundlach, 2014; Gronroos, 2012). When asked about the tools used to collect feedback from consumers, none reported having a formalized system, as MB-2 offered that, “If they don’t like it, they’ll let you know” (MB-2-Transcription). While this exemplifies

more of a laissez-faire, or even reactive rather than proactive, approach to customer service, it does denote a level of relationship, or at minimum open communication lines, that exists between MB-2 and his customer base, as 96% of unhappy customers will not complain to you, they just will not return (Beal, 2014). MB-3 viewed consumer satisfaction in terms of repeat business, and all four participants (MB-1-Transcript; MB-2-Transcription; MB-3-Transcription; MB-4-Transcription) regarded the consistent increasing profitability of their business as indirect consumer feedback, and therefore, customer satisfaction with their products. For each of the participants, I found customer reviews, all positive, on various online venues (MB-1-Internet Documents; MB-2-Internet Documents; MB-3-Internet Documents; MB-4-Internet Documents) but all stated that they were customer initiated. While Cronin-Gilmore (2012) posited that higher failure rates stem from an unwillingness to acquiesce to the role of consumer influence on firm activity, the participants' approach reflects greater alignment with Houston (1986), who cautioned against heavy reliance upon customer feedback to determine marketing activities. Reactionary and unstable, continually allowing the feedback of the customer to influence the decision-making negates the expertise of the business owner (Houston, 1986).

“We are always at the interface of talking to somebody one on one” shared MB-1 (MB-1-Transcription), emphasizing the real-time aspect in which feedback and response occur. The familiarity of the business owner with the consumer enhances their ability to understand and address the customer's needs (Petkovska, 2015). In microbusiness, marketing depends upon the subjective and intuitive response of the owner (Donnelly et

al., 2012), characterized by informal and quick decision-making (Penpece, 2014). Value creation occurs at the point of interaction between business, or business owner, and consumer (Parry et al., 2012). Only two of the four participants had structured mechanisms available for monitoring social media and website traffic (MB-1-Internet Documents; MB-4-Internet Documents), yet they did not use them because they lacked effective tools for translating traffic into sales.

With regards to monitoring their competitors, each participant was able to name their top competitors, but each felt that the quality of their service and product differentiated them (MB-1-Transcript; MB-2-Transcription; MB-3-Transcription; MB-4-Transcription). Also found in the online customer reviews, MB-4 reported that customers referenced the freshness of their products in comparison to their two largest, and nationally known, competitors, adding that customers actually get the product they paid for, as opposed to the discrepancy that often occurs between the Internet picture and received product (MB-4-Transcript; MB-4-Internet Document). Active in their industry, both as providers and consumers, MB-1 and MB-2 presented a greater level of expertise in their products, understanding the user-interface that existed. MB-2 shared that his biggest competitor had been a member of the local community for many years, a “household name like Heinz” was how he described them (MB-2-Transcription). While the competitor was a larger business, MB-2 went on to explain that he spent a lot time, personally, shopping around for the best deals in order to pass the savings onto his customers as well as making sure they understood exactly what they were getting for the

price. For MB-3, she knew her local and Internet-based competitors as well as how her pricing compared but felt that there was more than enough work available.

Despite the awareness of their competitor activity, none of the participants reflected concern, as MB-1 stated, “You really can’t worry about other people... you just have to do what you want to see” (MB-1-Transcript). Consequently, competitor activity played no role in the determination of their marketing activities. While not a direct relationship, the participants’ behaviors modeled a perceived ability to recognize and address consumer needs better than their competitors (Pleshko & Heiens, 2011), driven by positive consumer experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 2011), both viewed in terms of consistent growth in profitability and repeat customers.

Business owner as market data disseminator. As stated earlier in this study, MO involves three components, one of which is market information dissemination, specifically within an organization. This aspect of MO has less relevancy in microbusiness when compared to larger counterparts (Lonial & Carter, 2015), especially the four participating in this study, as the highest number of employees was two. Having said that, both MB-1 and MB-4 used the term “we” quite frequently throughout the interview, as MB-1’s employee was a long-time friend, and MB-4’s employee was his spouse. During both interviews, it was evident that the employees were aware of and played a role in the marketing decisions. While this reflects an unstructured process for information dissemination, it represents the business owner’s inclination for sharing information, receiving feedback, and viewing the business marketing activities as a collective effort.

Business owner as market data transformer. Whether consumer, competitor, or industry related, the data center for information intake, integration, and transformation centers on the microbusiness owner. Experimental, diverse, and informal (Nakara et al., 2012), these expressions not only represent the social media marketing practices of the microbusiness owners in this study, but also their approach to marketing, in general. “You don’t know what’s going to work until you just do it,” offered MB-4 (MB-4-Transcription). The current situation, or the perceived return on investment, rather than a strategic or structured planning process, seemed to be the most influential in determining the marketing activities for the participants.

MB-3 shared that her biggest competition came from the seemingly less expensive Internet-based companies, stating, “If I can talk people into actually trying me” (MB-3-transcription). This use of the word “me” emphasized the personal role of the business owner, central to the marketing activities, as the marketing mechanism. The ability of small business owners to offer highly personalized service, both in terms of knowing their customer as well as their level of personal involvement in the interactions, sets them apart from larger competitors (Petkovska, 2015). Found again during the interview with MB-4 who offered, “Print ads don’t set you apart. We are out there marketing ourselves” (MB-4-Transcript; MB-4-Internet Documents). The continuous existence of the microbusiness owner within the market provides them with the flexibility to make instantaneous marketing decisions, supporting high performance (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Liao et al., 2014). Understanding that their ability to sell their product depended upon their capacity to effectively and immediately assess and respond to, or in

terms of MO collect and transform, customer interest into product sales. Small firm marketing relies upon the instinct of the owner, reactionary to the presence of a threat or opportunity (Miclea, 2015), and the manner in which marketing progresses from idea to implementation is unique within small business (Fiore et al., 2013). In all four of the interviews, the responses emphasized the view of their products as directly entwined with their own reputation, an extension of their own identity, a concept highlighted in the research of Preechanont and Lu (2013) and Lähdesmäki (2012). Consequently, their marketing activities resulted from immediate intake, integration, and reaction, reflective of the subjective, intuitive, unstructured, and reactionary nature of small business owners revealed throughout small business research (Arasti et al., 2012; Ates & Bititci, 2011; Donnelly et al., 2012; Fadahunsi, 2012).

While the triangulated data did not directly reflect the inherent focus on marketing as originally conceptualized in market orientation, it provided valuable insight into the retail microbusiness owners approach to marketing, as an integrated component of who they are with minimal demarcation between owner and business (Lähdesmäki, 2012; Preechanont & Lu, 2013). The ability to seize opportunity (Weinzimmer & Nystrom, 2015), using their own skillsets to respond to external information, and in turn, market both themselves, and consequently, their products reflects characteristics of entrepreneurial marketing (Toombs & Harlow, 2014) and contingency theories (Boso et al., 2015). Eighty percent of a company's value is dependent upon an ability to market its assets (McDonald, 2014), and as board of director, stakeholder, owner, employee, judge, jury, and in the case of poor decision-making, the punished, the microbusiness owner is

the center of operations, the marketing mechanism, and the interface at which product turns into sales.

Emergent Theme 2: Human Capital, Time and Self

There exists significant small business research focused on the resource limitations, tangible and intangible, of small business (Price & Stoica, 2015) and the associated influence on small business failure (Williams, 2014). Elements owned or controlled by the firm constitute resources, and the ability of firm owner to levy these resources better than competitors provides advantage (Webb et al., 2013). Human capital, as a resource in small business, references the knowledge, experience, and skills of the business owner (Gittins & Fink, 2015), influential in its profitability (Liao et al., 2014). All are intangible assets directly related to and contributed by the small business owner. In responding to the interview question on allocation of resources, both financial and nonfinancial, to marketing activities, none of the participants mentioned tangible limitations as being influential in determining their marketing activities. On the other hand, the topic of time as an influential factor emerged throughout the interviews, regardless of the question. “Just have not had time to do it,” “We don’t have that time,” (MB-1-Transcript; MB-4-Transcript). Time allocation is a challenge, as microbusiness owners prioritize the many responsibilities of their role (Patten & Patten, 2014). When I followed up on this with each participant, the surfacing issue was the extent of personal immersion in the marketing activities, which in microbusiness, constitutes a component of human capital contributed directly by the business owner, and therefore, a firm resource. “I don’t have the time, but those are the types of things that I just make time

for,” stated MB-3, describing her involvement in community and professional organizations and events (MB-3-Transcript; MB-3-Internet Documents). While the ability of the microbusiness owners to continuously exist within the market supports higher performance (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Liao et al., 2014), it necessitates the commitment of time and requires personal investment by the business owner.

As the embodiment of the company and product (Lähdesmäki, 2012; Preechanont & Lu, 2013), and interface between business and consumer, each participant was actively involved with current customers as well as potential customers through participation in industry, community, and professional activities (MB-1-Internet documents; MB-2-Internet documents; MB-3-Internet documents; MB-4-Internet documents). MB-3 participated in four different chamber of commerce organizations around the area, recently taking on the position of President for one, involved in all the related activities (MB-3-Internet Documents). MB-1 and MB-2 carried full weekend schedules, providing support for and participating in industry related events, which increased their points of interactions (MB-1-Internet Documents; MB-2-Internet Documents). MB-4 participated in the local chamber of commerce as well as various community events where he would set up a booth, promoting product samples and enabling interaction with potential customers (MB-4-Internet Documents). This attention to product promotion contradicts the work of Parilla (2013), who posited that a greater focus on product promotion existed in small business rather than microbusiness.

“You’ve got to put in the time,” shared MB-2, who remarked about the 12 to 14 hours worked each day, especially during the early years of his business as well as the

busier seasons (MB-2-Transcript). While online venues may decrease time involvement and increase span of visibility for small business owners (Xia & Pedraza-Jimenez, 2015), visibility is not a like-kind exchange for personal involvement. Capital, both tangible and intangible, represents something that has value to a firm for its ability to support the operations and continued existence. Referencing MB-3's earlier statement, "If I can get them to try me" (MB-3-Transcript), each participant emphasized the perceived return on investment resulting from the contribution of human capital, via time and self, providing a platform for personal interaction, which served as their primary marketing venue.

Emergent Theme 3: Relationships and Networking

The marketing concept provides the foundation for marketing orientation, offering that firms who identify and satisfy consumer needs better than their competition have an advantage. An advantage for microbusiness owners resides in their ability to develop relationships with consumers (Anderson & Ullah, 2014), providing opportunity to listen and respond to their needs (Sinfield, Calder, McConnell, & Colson, 2012). The propensity towards networking and relationship building resounded in each interview, as they expressed the importance of involvement in professional organizations, community activities, and industry related events. These venues provided opportunity for personalized interaction. As conveyed by MB-1, the opportunity for "getting in front of people" and "being a presence," echoed in the sentiment of MB-3's emphasis on face-to-face interactions, determined the priority level associated with marketing opportunities (MB-1-Transcript; MB-3-Transcript).

Relationships. Expressed as vital to their continued existence, each participant conveyed recognition and appreciation for the importance of relationship building to their business. Customer engagement is a value added activity, providing feedback for the business owner and better product for the consumer (Sashi, 2012). From a MO perspective, the attention to relationships allowed the participants opportunity to personalize their interactions with consumers, able to not only identify and meet current needs (Sinfield et al., 2012), but also anticipate future opportunities through continued interactions. This attention to consumer relationships also reflects the essence of relationship marketing (RM), which emphasis the influence of relationships, both consumer and industry, to the profitability of the business (Parry et al., 2012). While each participant approached it with a process that reflected the influence of their own style and nature, they all seized opportunities to promote a continuing relationship rather than a one-time transaction. Relationship building, also noted as influential in small business success, cannot be outsourced, requiring the diligent involvement of the owner (Abou-Moghli & Al-Kasasbeh, 2012; Awuah & Reintert, 2012). MB-4 offered that the combination of product promotion with relationship building contributed significantly to their success, as they would “hand carry” baskets of product to their local consumers with new brochures, allowing for that face-to-face interaction emphasized by MB-3 (MB-3-Transcript; MB-4-Transcript). Small business owners, especially microbusiness owners who handle all activities of their firm’s daily operations, have opportunity for competitive advantage through greater knowledge of their customers (Anderson & Ullah, 2014; Atanassova & Clark, 2015). “Know your customers,” offered MB-1, sharing an example

of a situation in which his knowledge of and relationship with a particular customer enabled him to exceed the customer's expectations, proactively providing an unexpected, yet highly desired, product for the customer (MB-1-Transcript; MB-1-Internet documents). This co-creation of value resulting from relationship development benefits both parties (Parry et al., 2012). From a service recovery perspective, MB-3 shared that if a customer was unhappy with a purchased product, the long-term relationship was more important than the profit, and she focused on making it right, even to the detriment of her profit.

During the interview with MB-4, the influence of "symbiotic" relationships on marketing decisions surfaced (MB-4-Transcript). He went on to explain that while a particular marketing activity may not be an original venue for consideration, the relationship that existed with the requestor provided a determining factor. This further demonstrates the significance of impact that relationships have on the marketing activities for the participants in this study.

Networking. Networking promotes opportunity to use relationships in helping overcome resource limitations, providing market information and support at reasonable cost (Williams, 2014). With the introduction of social media, the concept of networking has expanded, allowing for greater span of access, maximizing social capital (Boling, Burns, & Dick, 2014) without requiring significant contribution of human capital. From the perspective of MO, the benefit of networking lies in the procurement of market information related to industry, competitors, and consumers (O'Donnell, 2014; Schoonjans, Cauwenberge, & Bauwheded, 2013). The dynamic nature of the market

highlights the resource limitations of small business owners, as they struggle to remain relevant. Networking provides mechanisms for mitigating these limitations, facilitating channels of communication for knowledge building, resource procurement, and customer acquisition (Schoonjans et al., 2013).

Each participant expressed significant involvement in various events and organizations for networking purposes. When asked about her use of traditional and non-traditional marketing venues, MB-3 offered that face to face networking ranked as her number one marketing activity (MB-3-Transcript). For MB-1 and MB-2, industry related events comprised a significant component of their marketing activities, as MB-1 explained, “Creating that social network is the lifeblood” (MB-1-Transcript; MB-1-Internet Documents; MB-2-Internet Documents). Offering that in addition to providing support services for cycling events, MB-1 intended to increase the involvement of and exposure for his business by hosting cycling events (MB-1-Transcript; MB-1-Website). MB-2 owns and races his own race car, expanding his networking sphere, as both a consumer and provider of race car related products (MB-2-Transcript; MB-2-Internet Documents).

When discussing her involvement in the various chamber organizations, MB-3 offered that it was not always the person sitting beside her who may become a customer but rather the individual to whom that person introduced her (MB-3-Transcript). She went on to add that she had peers in the retail industry who sent her clients because she sold products that they did not. These examples represent another innate benefit of networking through the indirect links created (O’Donnell, 2014). MB-1 and MB-2 also

used indirect links for networking, providing specialty products, which required the product manufacturers to identify their businesses on the manufacturers' websites as retailers for those products (MB-1-Internet documents; MB-2-Internet documents).

The greater the network or number of relationships, the more access the business owner has to various types of information, sources of support, and potential consumers. As expressed by each of the participants, the benefit for investing in networking and relationship building activities was associated with the continued increase in customer base and profitability. The emphasized focus on personal involvement in networking and relationship building activities connects to the role of the business owner as the marketing mechanism, the point at which interaction turns product into profit, and the requirement of human capital, necessitating time and self.

Applications to Professional Practice

Microbusinesses are entities directly shaped by the knowledge, skills, and values of the owner (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The experimental, diverse, informal, reactive, unstructured, and unique (Ates & Bititci, 2011; Fadahunsi, 2012; Nakara, Benmoussa, & Jaouen, 2012) characteristics of these firms reflects the nature of the owner, emphasizing the overlapping identity association that exists between business and owner (Preechanont & Lu 2013; Lähdesmäki, 2012). As expressed by the participants in this study, the microbusiness owner provides the interface between consumer and product, the point at which product transforms into profit. MO, the framework for this study, supported exploration of the pivotal role played by the retail microbusiness owner as the mechanism through which marketing data is collected, monitored, and transformed into marketing

activities. In microbusiness, marketing does not involve complex and strategic planning processes, but rather it relies on the subjective and intuitive response of the owner (Donnelly et al., 2012) based on circumstances (Bodlaj & Rojsek, 2014), and necessitates flexibility and instantaneous decision-making (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Liao et al., 2014). Microbusiness owners in the retail industry may be able to apply the findings of this study in their own practice, increasing their involvement and participation in groups and events that promote opportunity for interaction, enhancing the scope of their network, and supporting relationship building with peers and customers, both current and potential. Microbusiness owners in retail can apply this information to their marketing practices and may find the themes of (a) business owner as marketing mechanism, (b) human capital, time and self, and (c) relationships and networking of value as they work to establish or maintain a retail microbusiness in Sussex County, Delaware or similar surroundings.

Implications for Social Change

Improving the success rates of retail microbusinesses impacts not only the business owner and their family, but also those associated with or influenced by the activities of the business, including employees, suppliers, local organizations, and the general community in which the microbusiness owner operates. While failure provides opportunity for learning, it also brings the potential for financial, psychological, and emotional devastation (Ucbasaran et al., 2013). The implications for positive social change do not come as a direct result of the findings but rather a secondary benefit of improving success rates. Understanding (a) the identity relationship that exists between retail microbusiness owners and their business, (b) the importance of active owner

involvement in marketing, and (c) the significant influence of networking and relationships on profitability offers retail microbusiness owners, and government and industry programs that support this sector, insight and knowledge for improving sustainability for the firm and those impacted by its success or failure. Peer relationships built through participation in industry, community, and professional organizations and events enable the business owner to share their success with others, helping them to understand their role in the marketing activities of their business. Accepting the pivotal nature of their role as the marketing mechanism for their firm may help them to focus their marketing efforts on activities that support the longevity and profitability of the microbusiness, increasing (a) the financial security for business owners and their families, (b) employment opportunities, and (c) resources reinvested into the local community.

Recommendations for Action

The results of this study offered three themes: (a) role of business owner as marketing mechanism, (b) human capital, self and time, and (c) relationships and networking. Taking into consideration these themes, I have three recommendations for action. The first is that small business owners, specifically retail microbusiness owners, acknowledge the lack of delineation that exists between them and their business, understanding the value of their role as the marketing mechanism. Participating in industry, community, and professional organizations and activities increases their visibility, and opportunities to assimilate and respond to market information, developing networks and relationships.

Secondly, I recommend that retail microbusiness owners understand the human capital commitment required for their business to be successful. As the marketing mechanism, their active participation in activities that present marketing opportunities is necessary to support the success of their firm, requiring the contribution of time and self as human capital resources. “You’ve got to put in the time” (MB-2-Transcript), as they will not come to you if they do not know you exist.

Lastly, I recommend that microbusiness owners incorporate the significance of relationship building and networking, as this is the “lifeblood” (MB-1-Transcript) of small business. Whether it is industry, community, or professionally related, small business owners need to be actively involved in the area in which they exist and serve. Taking every opportunity to interact with peers and consumers, current and prospective, builds points of contacts, which can provide vital information for marketing, opening doors, and potential sources of revenue.

I will pursue dissemination of the findings through publication in scholarly and business journals. Additional considerations include venues that promote interaction with the specific population to whom this information may be of value. Providing presentations at local professional organizations, such as Chambers of Commerce, would promote an interactive learning environment. In addition, I will look for opportunities to present at seminars and workshops offered by organizations that support the small business sector. Lastly, as a microbusiness owner who provides support services to the small business sector, and a business finance educator, I have additional points of contact to support further dissemination of the findings.

Recommendations for Further Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the mechanisms used by retail microbusiness owners to collect, monitor, and transform market data into marketing activities. The limitations of this study highlight research opportunities and guide the recommendations provided. The limitations relate to the chosen (a) framework and design, (b) interview questions, (c) sample population, and (d) geographic location. Future researchers can validate the strength of the study using a different research method and design, choosing a different conceptual or theoretical framework through which to explore the topic, restructuring the interview questions in alignment with the chosen framework, selecting a different sample population or industry, and electing to pull the sample population from a different geographical location. Changing any or all of the above elements may (a) strengthen the findings of this study, producing either the same or similar themes, (b) yield contradictory findings that necessitate further research, or (c) offer supplemental findings that enhance the depth of detail and provide greater insight into the research topic. In addition, each of the themes that emerged from this study highlights potential research opportunities, contextualized within microbusiness. As microbusiness research continues to expand in the literature, quantitative studies may determine thematic prevalence and provide small business leaders, and those who support the small business segment, with clear guidance for allocating education and financial resources for microbusiness owners.

Reflections

As I reflect upon the doctoral journey, I find that I learned as much about myself, as I did the research topic. This process, similar to the themes that emerged from this study, required that I understand my role as the mechanism for assimilation, collecting data and transforming it into a comprehensive, well supported study. It is an expedition, requiring tremendous commitment of time and self, immersed in the research to bring forth depth of detail and meaningful thematic interpretation. The networking and relationships that resulted from the process have enriched my understanding of the retail microbusiness industry and highlighted potential opportunities to influence the business practices of the small business owner with whom I interact and provide support.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the mechanisms used by retail microbusiness owners to collect, monitor, and transform data into marketing activities. In section 1, I focused on the need for the study, concentrating on the failure rate of small business and the disconnect that existed between theory and knowledge in the microbusiness segment of small business. The literature review, contained within section 1, reviewed MO, the conceptual framework used to support this study, additional theories used within current marketing research, and various aspects of small business. In Section 2, I provided the study details to include (a) population sampling and inclusion, (b) data collection, organization, analysis, and storage, and (c) reliability and validity in terms of rigor and its components. Section 3 included (a) a detailed discussion of the findings, (b) the application to professional practice, (c) the

implications for social change, (d) recommendations for professional practice, (e) recommendations for action, and (f) the recommendations for further research.

The data sources included for triangulation consisted of (a) participant interviews, (b) observations from site visits, industry and community events, and professional organization participation (c) field notes, and (d) Internet documentation. Data saturation occurred when data analysis failed to produce new information. Member checking occurred, as the participants received transcription summaries to include my thematic interpretations in order to ensure accuracy their intended meaning. After data coding and analysis, three main themes emerged: (a) Business owner as marketing mechanism, (b) Human capital, time and self, and (c) Relationships and networking. I used market orientation as the conceptual framework for this study, providing the means through which I could explore how microbusiness owners collected, monitored, and transformed market data into marketing activities. While the triangulated data did not directly reflect the inherent focus on marketing, as originally conceptualized in market orientation, it provided valuable insight into the retail microbusiness owners approach to marketing as an integrated component of who they are, with minimal delineation between owner and business.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Place:

Assigned Identifier: _____

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Before we start, I would like to review the informed consent form with you and answer any questions that you may have. To ensure that I capture all of the information you provide as accurately as possible, I would like to audio record our interview. Only I will be privy to the tapes. All information collected during this interview will be kept confidential and maintained in a secured file, which will be destroyed after 5 years.

Background questions:

1. How long have you operated a retail microbusiness?
2. How many employees do you have?
3. What are the responsibilities of your role as owner?

Focus questions:

4. What marketing tools (traditional and non-traditional) do you use to communicate with your customers?
5. How often do you elicit feedback from customers?
6. How do you integrate customer feedback into your marketing activities?
7. How do you monitor and respond to competitor activity and changes in industry trends?

8. How do you measure the effectivity of your marketing activities?
9. How do you allocate resources, financial and nonfinancial, to marketing activities?
10. What education or professional experience do you have that supports your ability to manage the marketing activities of your business?
11. Is there any other information related to marketing activities that you feel would add value to this study?