

2018

Social Media Marketing Strategies in Landscape Industry Small Businesses

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Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Crystal Lupo

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Social Media Marketing Strategies in Landscape Industry Small Businesses

by

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PhD, Auburn University, 2010

MBA, Walden University, 2015

MS, Auburn University, 2003

BS, Binghamton University, 2001

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

April 2018

Abstract

Almost 50% of small businesses close within 5 years in part because of inadequate marketing strategies. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing to help ensure business viability. The population for this study was landscape industry small business owners in central Alabama, who have been successful in using social media marketing. The conceptual framework for the study included adoption theory to understand the successful implementation of social media as a marketing tool, and social exchange theory to explain how social behavior results from the exchange process within social media. Data collection included semistructured interviews with 4 small business owner from the landscape industry and content analysis of the social media for 4 landscape industry small businesses. Data were alphanumerically and thematically coded. Analysis revealed 4 themes: (a) marketing strategy adoption; (b) primary social media types used; (c) social media content including aspects such as service, education, and holiday posts; and (d) benefits and challenges such as social media as a low-cost marketing option for improved visibility, but with a trial-and-error learning curve. Results may be used by small businesses to improve their long-term viability through social media marketing strategies, and to improve citizens' quality of life and the local economy through increased tax revenues leading to more resources for schools, public safety organizations, and other institutions in the community.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Social media is a low-cost marketing tool used by many businesses (Hassan, Nadzim & Shirtuddin, 2015; Perry, 2014). The two-way interaction of social media allows businesses to create and expand a customer base enhancing their ability to succeed (Rauniar, Rawski, Yang, & Johnson, 2014). Given the high rate of small business failure, social media marketing may serve as a valuable tool for small businesses to increase their viability in the larger marketplace.

Background of the Problem

Small businesses fail at an alarming rate. Recent reports have indicated that as many as 54% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operation, with marketing often cited as a pivotal factor in small business success (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Gray & Mabey, 2005; Perry, 2014). Many small business owners continue to underutilize low-cost marketing options available despite evidence suggesting that alternative marketing strategies are beneficial to small business success (Castronova & Huang, 2012). Of those low-cost marketing tools, social media marketing has become an increasingly important tool to remain competitive in the larger marketplace (Perry, 2014).

For more than a decade, small business leaders have increased visibility through social media marketing, and as a result have improved their businesses' viability and sustainability (Taneja & Toombs, 2004). Evidence indicated that as small businesses become immersed in social media marketing, they become a stronger market contender by acquiring market intelligence (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). However, the adoption of social media best practices in small business continues to be deficient (Shang, 2014).

Problem Statement

Small business owners use online communications parsimoniously as part of their marketing strategy despite models suggesting the importance of social media utilization in attracting new customers (Perry, 2014). Almost 50% of all small businesses close within 5 years in part because of poorly executed or inadequate marketing strategies (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Perry, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). The general business problem was that some small business owners are ineffectively using, or not using, social media marketing strategies despite social media's marketability, resulting in decreased business viability. The specific business problem was that some landscape industry small business owners lack strategies to adopt innovative social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. For this study, I measured success or efficacious use of social media through active social media participation. I defined *active participation* as an average of at least one social media post each month that elicited two-way communication. The sample for this study included four landscape industry small business owners located in Auburn, Alabama, who had been efficacious in their use of social media marketing tools as part of their overall marketing strategy. The implications for social change include increasing the viability of landscape small businesses in the local economy through the use of social media marketing strategies. Social change could

arise in the form of derivative local economic improvements, which could lead to enhancements in both quality of life and other areas in the local community.

Nature of the Study

I used the qualitative method to explore how landscape industry small business owners use social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. Given that the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of why and how social media marketing strategies are used, a qualitative method was more appropriate than a quantitative method (Yin, 2014). A quantitative method would have been appropriate if the focus had been on a quantifiable factor in social media marketing. Likewise, given that the focus of this proposed research study is gaining an in-depth understanding how and why landscape industry small business owners are using social media marketing strategies, without the utilization of quantifiable variables, a mixed-methods approach was also not appropriate.

I used a qualitative multiple case study design to explore how landscape industry small business owners use social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. The rationale for using a qualitative case study design for to gain an in-depth understanding of how and why landscape industry small business owners are using social media marketing strategies. A qualitative multiple case study design was appropriate to conduct this field research because case study researchers include multiple sources of evidence to reach an understanding of the business problem (Gog, 2105; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). Incorporating data from a variety of sources strengthened the general understanding of landscape industry small businesses owners' successful use of online

marketing strategies. Also, a multiple case study was more appropriate than a single case study because I explored several small businesses in the landscape industry, as opposed to a single small business. Furthermore, multiple case studies can result in more powerful analytic conclusions (Gog, 2105; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Research Question

The central research question for this study was as follows: How do landscape industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability?

Interview Questions

1. How do you typically use social media as part of your marketing strategy?
2. How does social media marketing fit into your overall marketing mix?
3. How do you know if certain social media marketing strategies that you use are more successful than others?
4. What were your greatest challenges to successfully implementing social media marketing strategies?
5. How did you address those challenges?
6. What are some of the greatest benefits of using social media marketing as part of your marketing strategy?
7. What additional information that we have not already discussed might be pertinent to this study on how you use social media marketing?

Conceptual Framework

Researchers use adoption theory to understand the successful implementation of new business ideas (Chien-Wen, Wei-Cyuan, & Wen-Kuo, 2014; Ramirez, 2013; Setiowati, Hartoyo, Daryanto, & Arifin, 2011; Taylor, Voelker, & Pentina, 2011). Adoption theory research originated as a multidisciplinary theory by Tarde (1903), who concluded that the adoption rate of innovations followed the S-shaped curve. Rogers (2003) defined *innovation* as a practice perceived as new by an individual. The innovation does not necessarily have to be objectively new, particularly if the individual perceives the innovation as new (Lupo, 2015; Rogers, 1995). For some landscape industry small businesses, an innovation to marketing strategies can be the adoption of social media marketing. Several researchers described social media marketing adoption and factors that hinder the adoption process (Pechrová, Lohr, & Havlíček, 2015; Perry, 2004; Verheyden & Goeman, 2013).

Once an organization has adopted social media marketing strategies, a series of exchanges takes place between business and customer, and economic action becomes a balance between business self-interest and the development of sustainable relationships (De Clercq, Dimov, & Thongpapani, 2010). Social exchange theory can be used to explain how social behavior results from this exchange process, which maximizes mutual benefits while minimizing costs (Homans, 1958; Surma, 2016). Begley, Khatri, and Tsang (2009) noted that social-network-based relationships shape the economic process using easy information access, mutual support, trust, and cooperation. Surma (2016) suggested that online social networks are an ideal platform for social exchange because

of the opportunity for new and continued business-customer relationships at a relatively low cost to businesses.

Operational Definitions

Adoption theory: Adoption theory is a theoretical lens for understanding how an individual adopts a new technology, which can either be new or perceived as new. Adoption theory incorporates four aspects of understanding, including how an innovation begins, communication channels of innovations, time as defined by the S-shaped rate of adoption, and socioeconomic characteristics of adopter categories (Rogers, 2003).

Landscape industry: The landscape industry includes organizations involved in landscape design and maintenance services on both commercial and residential levels, including design build, arborist services, fertilization, landscape installation and maintenance, tree planting, pruning, spray services, and others (IBISWorld, 2016).

Small business: A small business includes companies defined as small by the Small Business Association and includes size criteria determined by averaging the number of workers and annual receipts (SBA, 2016; U.S. Department of Treasury, 2016). For this study, a small business was a company that had less than 50 employees.

Social exchange: Social exchange refers to a multidimensional relationship originating with an exchange of social ideas in a transaction-oriented style with a certain level of perceived support, affective commitment, trust, and exchange quality (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014).

Social exchange theory: Social exchange theory is a theoretical lens used to explore the multidimensional relationship originating with an exchange of social ideas in

a transaction-oriented style with the expectation of an economic goal and a mutually reciprocal relationship and includes consideration of the impact of larger environmental factors as well as the complexity of exchanges (Duane, Domegan, McHugh, & Devaney, 2016).

Social media: Social media includes two-way communication platforms that enable the free flow of ideas and information and value exchange (Csordas & Gati, 2014).

Social media marketing: Social media marketing is a marketing strategy that incorporates the use of social media to create a two-way exchange between customer and business, and differs somewhat from digital marketing that follows more of a traditional marketing platform of one-way exchanges (Csordas & Gati, 2014).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

The research assumptions are the aspects included in the study that the researcher takes for granted or assumes to be true (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Simon, 2011; Yin, 2014). The research assumptions for this study included the ability to obtain honest and open responses from participants. I also assumed that I framed questions in a way that captured information to answer the central research question. There was also an assumption that participants who claimed to have successfully used social media marketing had used social media successfully, and while this was partially overcome through documentation of their social media use online, success was subjective to a point.

Limitations

The research limitations are the factors that limit the implications of the study findings (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Simon, 2011; Yin, 2014). The research limitations for this study included potential participant bias; this could have included potential location bias, company bias, industry bias, or bias against the researcher in some capacity. Another limitation included limited transferability due to sample size and location. Potential researcher bias could have also existed, but was mitigated through the use of proper research design and methodology. The participants in this study were also limited to business owners with no more than 50 employees, located in a specific metropolitan area in Alabama, who had experience using social media marketing.

Delimitations

The research delimitations outline the boundaries of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Simon, 2011; Yin, 2014). The delimitation of this study included landscape industry businesses with no more than 50 employees, located in a specific metropolitan area of Alabama. The study did not include businesses with over 50 employees, or businesses that do not use social media marketing.

Significance of the Study**Contribution to Business Practice**

Increased use of landscape industry small businesses' social media marketing strategies could contribute to business practice in various ways. The specific business problem was that some landscape industry small business owners lack strategies for adopting innovative social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability.

The findings from this study may be significant to businesses practice not only because they could provide an in-depth understanding the topic allowing for increased application, but also because small business owners may use the results to apply social media marketing strategies to help improve their businesses' success rates. Also, the findings from this study may contribute to effective business practice by indicating which social media marketing tools are most effective for landscape small businesses.

Implications for Social Change

This research problem may be of interest to leaders who have the goal of positive social change. This study may be useful to small business leaders given that small businesses have added roughly 8 million new jobs to the U.S. economy over the past 25 years, while big businesses have eliminated roughly 4 million jobs during that same period (SBA, 2016). However, almost 50% of all small businesses close within 5 years in part because of poorly executed or inadequate marketing strategies (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Perry, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Although small businesses are providing job opportunities to the U.S. economy, their continued failure rate has prevented realization of the full benefits of social change.

Zahra and Wright (2015) suggested entrepreneurship and small business activity contribute to the larger society in terms of creating financial, environmental, and social wealth. If small businesses can improve their long-term viability as the result of incorporating social media marketing strategies, then social change may be realized in the form of an improved local economy and improved quality of life for citizens. Increased

tax revenues for local communities may contribute to positive social change through improvements in social institutions, such as schools and public safety organizations.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. This literature review provides a critical analysis and synthesis of literature relevant to the conceptual frameworks of adoption theory and social exchange theory within the context of social media marketing. I completed an exhaustive review of peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, scholarly seminal books, and trade journals.

The search process included the following key words: *social media marketing, social media, marketing, small business marketing, small business social media marketing, small business online marketing, landscape industry, landscape industry small business, landscape industry marketing, landscape industry social media marketing, relationship marketing, adoption theory, adoption of innovations, diffusion, and social exchange theory*. Roughly 85% of the 102 articles used were published between 2013 and 2017, and 92% were from peer-reviewed journals. I used the following databases to conduct this exhaustive review: Business Source Complete, Sage Journals, ProQuest, ABI/INFORM Complete, Academic Search Complete, and Thoreau Multi-Database. I also used the Google Scholar search engine.

The literature review is organized as follows. First, a I provide brief overview of social media and social media marketing followed by the conceptual framework for the

study. Next, I describe adoption theory and social exchange theory, which served as the conceptual framework, including general information on adoption theory, elements of adoption, adoption of social media marketing strategies, obstacles to adoption, and strategic alignment. Next, I address theoretical components of social exchange theory such as brand loyalty, efficiency, cost savings, and positive brand engagement through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). Then, I apply the conceptual framework to social media marketing through an in-depth exploration of factors such as relationship, content, value creation, innovation, complexity, and influence of social media on consumer behavior. This is followed by a review of the literature on the importance of small businesses to economic development, and the importance and utilization of small business marketing strategies. I conclude with a focus on the landscape industry, and specifically the use of social media in landscape industry small businesses.

Social Media and Social Media Marketing Overview

Changes in the economy during the first decade of the 21st century led to social innovation in information communication technologies, such as social media (Charalabidis, Loukis, & Androutsopoulou, 2014). The utilization of social media has shifted the way business leaders implement their customer relationship management practices (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014; Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2016). Social media can take various forms from microblogs to weblogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, wikis, podcasts, and others (Delerue & Cronje, 2015; Yazdanparast, Joseph, & Muniz, 2016).

Social media marketing has emerged as a powerful marketing channel that enables information diffusion, cohesion, and relationship building (Ananda, Hernandez-Garcia, & Lamberti, 2016; Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2014). Csordas and Gati (2014) described social media as a series of two-way communication platforms that enable the free flow of ideas and information and value exchange.

Social media marketing is a strategy that incorporates the use of social media to create a two-way exchange between customers and businesses (Csordas & Gati, 2014). Social media adoption is a relatively new trend, and adopters are typically viewed as innovators or early adopters (Delerue & Cronje, 2015). Increased social media use is beginning to play a central role in consumer-brand interaction and engagement (Yazdanparast et al., 2016). Social media marketing differs from digital marketing, which follows a more traditional marketing platform of one-way exchanges (Csordas & Gati, 2014). One of the unique aspects of social media marketing is in the promotion of bidirectional communication between businesses and consumers (Chang et al., 2014).

Adoption and Social Exchange Theories as a Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this project was based on adoption theory and social exchange theory. Adoption theory is used to understand the successful implementation of new business ideas (Chien-Wen et al., 2014; Ramirez, 2013; Setiowati et al., 2015; Zucker et al., 2014). I used adoption theory as a lens to focus on how the adoption process and subsequent utilization of social media marketing tools in landscape industry small businesses occurred. Social exchange theory is used to explain how social

behavior results from an exchange process, which maximizes mutual benefits while minimizing costs (Surma, 2016).

Social media represents a paradigm shift in the adoption of communication and social exchange, facilitating more extensive communication at a lower cost (Charalabidis, et al. 2014). Several researchers reported a positive correlation between eWOM and relationship creation (Chien-Wen et al., 2014; Soyoung, Martinez, McClure, & Soo Hyun, 2016). One way that eWOM marketing is effective is through social media (Chang et al., 2014). For small businesses, the adoption of social media as a means of social exchange may provide a way of marketing to a larger audience through effective use of word of mouth, which has traditionally been the primary means of small business marketing.

Online social networks are an ideal platform for social exchange because of the opportunity for new and continued business-customer relationships at a relatively low cost to businesses, and create important social exchanges resulting in content and value creation (Arunjo et al., 2015; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Malaska, 2015; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015; Surma, 2016). Social media marketing has emerged as a powerful marketing channel that enables information diffusion, cohesion, and relationship building (Ananda et al., 2016; Chang et al., 2014). The U.S. small business sector is a driver of economic growth and job creation, yet little is known about the small businesses' adoption of social media marketing as well as its influence in generating positive market outcomes based on social exchange (Broekemeir, Chau, & Seshadri, 2015).

Adoption Theory

The application of current adoption theory originated in the 1943 Ryan and Gross hybrid corn study, resulting in four aspects of the adoption theory (Lupo, 2015; Stone, 2016; Zucker et al., 2014). The four aspects of adoption theory include how an innovation begins, communication channels of innovations, time as defined by the S-shaped rate of adoption, and the socioeconomic characteristics of adopter categories (Rogers, 2003). Factors that influence adoption rates include observability, relative advantage, complexity, and compatibility (Rogers, 2003). Innovation adoption theories indicate that increased sales, increased customer connection, and cost reduction are positively related to the use of social media marketing; however, scholars have debated the degree of growth achieved through social media (De Jong & Hulsink, 2012; Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012).

Within the context of adoption, Rogers (2003) defined innovation as a practice perceived as new by an individual. Little importance is placed on whether the innovation is actually new; instead, what is important is whether the individual perceives the innovation as new (Lupo, 2015; Rogers, 2003). A new technology or innovation need not be new to society. Instead, the technology can simply be new in the eyes of the adopter (Lupo, 2015). Adoption theory has applicability in adopting marketing strategy innovation as well as material innovations. For some small businesses, the adoption of social media marketing strategies may be perceived as an innovation to use in their future marketing strategy.

Adoption Theory and Social Media Marketing

Contemporary adoption theory focuses on identifying specific variables that describe innovation adopters, categorizing adopter variables, and defining socioeconomic differences in adopter groups (Chien-Wen et al., 2014; Ramirez, 2013; Rogers, 2003; Setiowati et al., 2015; Stone, 2016; Zucker et al., 2014). Rogers (2003) identified five categories of adopters within the innovation process defined as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards.

Each adopter obtains innovation knowledge, decides to adopt or reject the innovation, implements the innovation, and seeks reinforcement of his or her adoption decision. Lupo (2015) found that forest sector small business owners often fell into the innovative group, adopting new technologies faster than the average individual. A similar outcome might exist regarding the innovative adoption and utilization of social media marketing tools in the landscape industry, given that these small business owners are also members of the green industry. Although members of the innovative category are more likely adopters, other factors must be considered in the relationship between social media marketing and adoption theory such as its use in business base creation, product and service adoption, and low-cost marketing tool options.

Business base creation. Surma (2016) discussed the importance of online social networks to create a strong business base in part because of the low costs associated with online versus offline social networking. Specifically focusing on Facebook, Surma discussed how aspects such as liking a post is a low-cost activity that allows information to travel not only across the business's Facebook network, but often to the customer's

Facebook network, where friends see what has been liked (Surma, 2016). Surma discussed the implications of adopting and subsequently applying this idea to marketing strategies to help sustain strong customer networks.

Adoption theory is useful to understanding social media and other forms of e-communication adoption within industries (Markus, 1994; Mergel, 2016; Wood & Khan, 2016). Markus (1994) explored the utilization of both e-mail and social media rather than face to face interactions to communicate, and offered a historical perspective on e-communication adoption. Results indicated that face-to-face communication was not necessarily more effective than electronic media in creating a business base, despite that fact that this finding occurred during a period when traditional face-to-face interactions were considered richer communication, as opposed to the leaner communication of e-communications (Markus, 1994).

Mergel (2016) used adoption theory as a lens when conducting an ethnographic study to explore social media adoption in U.S. government agencies. Mergel pointed out that social media is often developed and hosted by third parties, leaving government organizations a limited role in aligning social media utilization with their existing routines. Small business outsourcing of social media marketing seems unlikely given that the cost is often a barrier to small business marketing strategies (Perry, 2014). Nevertheless, social media marketing plays a crucial role in product and service adoption (Franklin, 2014).

Social media marketing in product and service adoption. Many small and medium-size business understand the importance of mobile technology in increasing

customer-business interactions (Franklin, 2014). Typically, consumer trends in mobile technology are often successfully mirrored by businesses. However, researchers have shown that simply having social media followers does not necessarily equate to increases in activity (Pechrová et al. 2015). Also, although social media can be used as an effective marketing tool, social media marketing tools are not fully used (Hassan et al., 2015; Pechrová et al., 2015). Taken together, this produces a gap in knowledge in effective social media marketing utilization.

Frequent changes and variations of social media utilization mean that innovative characteristics as defined by Rogers (2003) are of particular importance in social media marketing adoption. For example, Franklin (2014) found that text messaging has slowed while newer technologies such as in-app messaging have increased. Adoption of mobile devices as a social media marketing tool for small businesses increases productive use of time and initiates better two-way conversations over traditional communication such as calling a landline or e-mailing (Franklin, 2014; Valentini, 2015). The adoption and effective business utilization of mobile technology illustrates how social networks play a crucial role in product adoption.

Creating a stronger relationship presence on the front end of product or service considerations is particularly important given that product and service perceptions can limit adoption (Ramirez, 2013). Perhaps some landscape industry small business owners do not realize the potential in adopting social media marketing strategies or the lack of relationship presence that can be built as a result. However, the utilization of adoption theory is useful to understand how eWOM communications affect consumer purchase

intent given the importance of leveraging eWOM with traditional marketing to capture purchase intent (Chien-Wen, Wei-Cyuan, and Wen-Kuo, 2014; Eisenberg, Johnson, & Pieterse, 2015). The applicability of these studies speaks volumes to the importance of landscape industry and other service-oriented small business online marketing adoption given that the authors found that eWOM greatly affects purchase intent.

Adoption of social media marketing as a low-cost tool. Marketing strategies impact overall business performance (Perry, 2014). Social media and other online marketing strategies increase small business sales, productivity, market performance (Dlodlo & Mafini, 2014; Eida & El-Gohary, 2013; Rollins et al. 2013). However, some small businesses find it difficult to mitigate time, resources, and ambitions to successfully adopt innovations that would contribute to growth (De Jong & Hulsink, 2012; Pechrová, et al., 2015; Thompson, Williams, & Thomas, 2013). Small businesses have resource constraints that often limit the marketing strategies they are able to incorporate (Perry, 2014). Perry (2014) noted cost as a limiting factor in marketing adoption as well, in that, social media marketing allowed small scale restaurant owners;’ adoption of low-cost marketing strategies to support their overall business plan.

Social media and other online marketing strategies could be a powerful, low-cost marketing tool that small business owners can use to maintain a stronger relationship presence. Setiowati, Hartoyo, Daryanto, and Arifin (2015) discussed organizational factors and innovativeness among small and medium-sized businesses in Indonesia and found that adopting cost-effective internet marketing strategies had a positive influence

on marketing and enhanced business performance. Similar results might be obtained through landscape industry small business online marketing as well.

Aspects that hinder the adoption process. While there are several important aspects of social media marketing adoption, there are other aspects that hinder or slow the adoption process (Franklin, 2014; Pechrová, Lohr, & Havlíček, 2015; Verheyden & Goeman, 2013). Potential reasons for the lack of adoption include a lack of understanding, familiarity with possibilities, and lack of experiences using social media (Pechrová, et al., 2015).

Verheyden and Goeman (2013) also explored whether company size affects nature and intensity of the adoption process of social media marketing, outlining important obstacles to adoption such as money, time, knowledge, skills, and other tangible and intangible resources. Lupo (2015) found that cost was a major prohibitive factor in small business's ability to adopt an innovation perceived as new to the individual business owner. It is important to understand factors that limit adoption in landscape industry small businesses as well.

Adoption of strategic alignment of social media marketing to create effective social exchange. Mergel (2016) indicated that strategic alignment and routinization lead to the institutionalization of social media adoption. Wood and Kahn (2016) used a quantitative approach to analyze data from senior level employees in New Zealand and South Korea. Results indicated that customer support, sales, and brand affinity positively affected social media adoption, whereas lack of social media strategy as well as security concerns negatively impacted social media adoption (Wood & Kahn, 2016).

Once the adoption of a social media marketing strategy innovation has taken place, relationships progress through a series of exchanges between business and customer. Begley, Khatri, and Tsang (2009) noted that almost all economic behavior today is embedded in social network based relationships that condition the economic process using easy information access, mutual support, trust, and cooperation. Theoretical and practical application of the role of social exchange theory in contemporary social media marketing, has been debated in the literature (Baer & Long, 2014; Duane, Domegan, McHugh, & Devaney, 2016).

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange is a multidimensional long-term relationship, as opposed to a traditional short-term transaction (Duane et al., 2016). Throughout the last half of the 20th century and a decade into the 21st century, social exchange theory was understood as originating with an exchange of social ideas in a transaction oriented style which relied primarily on the delivery of products (Homans, 1958). Later, the emergence of an economic goal with mutual reciprocal relationships emerged. However, these earlier analyses failed to explore a broad structural and behavioral context. In the 1990s, research focused on an expanded understanding of social exchange to include the impact of larger environmental factors and the complexity of exchanges (Duane, et al. 2016). Social exchange includes various attributes include a certain level of perceived support, affective commitment, trust, and exchange quality (Colquitt, Baer, Long, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2014).

Brand loyalty through social exchange. Jing-Yu, Ming, Bing-Sheng, and Xing-Dong, (2014) discussed the use of online marketing to increase customer brand loyalty through the promotion of social relationships among users testing for the effect of network embeddedness on pro-community behaviors. The authors illustrated the importance of creating online community relationships regarding achieving brand/company loyalty.

However, results of the Jing-Yu, Ming, Bing-Sheng, and Xing-Dong (2014) study contradicted results from other studies, such as Pechrová, Lohr, and Havlíček, (2015) who found that that social media brand support did not correlate to purchase behavior. Begley, Khatri, & Tsang, (2010) noted that while economics and finance literature tended to discredit the importance of social exchange networking, organizational theory, by contrast, focused on the benefits of social networking including easy information access, cooperation, trust, and mutual support.

Efficiency and cost savings through social exchange. Digital technologies, such as social media, are acknowledged as an effective and efficient means to connect consumers to a product or service (Kennedy, 2016). McFarland and Ployhart (2015) pointed out that social media has revolutionized the way people connect and community with each other, and has the potential to revolutionize organizational behavior as well. McFarland and Ployhart (2015) proposed that social media contexts differ from non-digital context and therefore, theories need to be modified to reflect the uniqueness of social media.

In line with social exchange theory, social media contexts change meaning in that the physicality aspect of relationships are technologically driven, the cost is calculated differently due to asynchronicity and latency differences, and the meaning of benefit differs due to variation in accessibility, interdependence, latency (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Simon, Brexendorf, and Fassnacht (2016) proposed that consumers' use Facebook to enhance their self-image by increasing favorable impressions from others through public brand consumption. Social media platforms cultivate a networked culture creating a sense of community, shared values, and participation (Kennedy, 2015; Lacoste, 2016). The exchange of good and services exists within a sociotechnical systems of shared economy. Internal personal forces positively influenced brand community engagement, whereas external social forces negatively impacted brand community engagement (Baumgarth, Merrilees, & Urde, 2013; Simon, et al., 2016; Uusitalo, 2014).

Social exchange for positive brand engagement through eWOM. Therefore, in the context of social exchange theory, social exchange for increased value will positively influence consumer engagement in the brand particularly if there is a perception of some benefit, accessibility, and relevance (Bronner & de Hoog, 2014; Hajli, 2014; Lacoste, 2016; Simon, et al., 2016). Surma (2016) discussed the importance of online social networks to create a strong business base, in part, due to the low costs associated with online vs. offline social networking. Specifically focused on Facebook, the Surma (2016) discussed how aspects such as "liking" a post is a low-cost activity that allows information to travel, not only across those in the business's Facebook network but often to the customer's Facebook network as well, who often see what their friends have

“liked”. One of the major implications of applying social media marketing strategies is in its ability to create and sustain strong customer networks to help ensure small business viability.

There are currently several options for consumers to obtain their products and services, both on a local as well as global level. In this sense, that building those strong customer networks and relationship marketing is more important than ever. In small businesses, relationship marketing is even more important since often small businesses lack resources to advertise on a large scale (Kacker & Perrigot, 2016). Therefore, those relationships becoming a strong value to the company. Cameron, Miller, and Frew (2010) explored family owned businesses in Australia to understand how relationship marketing even played a role in employee retention in small family owned businesses and found that relationship marketing required more than partnerships. In ethnic minority small businesses, aspects such as succession, networking, and managing relationships in marketing were important elements to business success, most of which was often achieved through word of mouth (Len, Martin, & Stone, 2003). Similarly, customer retention is an important element captured through effective social media marketing practices (Lo, Mohamad, Ramayah, & Wang, 2015).

The notion of word of mouth marketing can be portrayed in many ways, particularly with the advent and rise of social media. Therefore, social media marketing has evolved as a new form of word of mouth marketing. Ivanauskiene, Auruskeviciene, Ramoniene, and Skudiene (2015) explored relationship between e-marketing strategies and internalization successes and found that communication interactivity is critical to

knowledge and experience sharing between partners and suppliers. Hence, within e-marketing or internet marketing, a particular form of marketing, social media marketing has taken shape. Social media marketing is an important form of word of mouth marketing, known as e- word of mouth or eWOM. Surma (2016) discussed the importance of online social networks to create a strong business base, in part, due to the low costs associated with online vs offline social networking. Several authors have indicated a positive correlation between eWOM and relationship creation (Chien-Wen, Wei-Cyuan, & Wen-Kuo, 2014; Soyoung, Martinez, McClure, & Soo Hyun, 2016). One way that eWOM marketing is effectively used is through social media (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2014).

Application of Adoption and Social Exchange Theories to Social Media Marketing

A marked shift between traditional marketing communication to social media and other electronic marketing occurred as companies began the adoption process upon recognition that social media provided many advantages such as secured reputation, increased sales, increased customer involvement in brand awareness, and improved customer loyalty (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2015.; Katona & Sarvary, 2014; Zailskaite-Jaske & Kuvykaite, 2013). Three important communication aspects of social media marketing include brand to consumer, consumer to consumer, and customer to brand (Zailskaite-Jaske & Kuvykaite, 2013). Interactive media, such as social media, is a helpful tool to engage current customers with potential consumers, thus improving a new customer base (Wagler, 2013).

Social media marketing has emerged as a useful marketing tool that can be used

to influence and track consumer behavior in terms of various aspects. Some of which includes, value and content creation through the adoption of a circulation-centric perspective (Figueiredo & Scaraboto, 2016; Hajli, 2014, Roblek, Bach, Mesko, & Bertoneceli, 2013). Aspects of social media can be effectively used to improve customer loyalty and brand culture creation (Raab, Berezan, Krishen, & Tanford, 2016; Fan & Gordon, 2014; Schembri & Latimer, 2016; Schivinski, Christodoulides, & Dabrowski, 2016). Social media can also be used as a means of consumer empowerment to complement offline consumer activity (Yuksel, Milne, & Miller, 2016). The problem though is that many companies are not effectively using social media (Hudson & Thal, 2013).

Relationship, Content, and Value Creation

Research on tourism marketers noted the importance of consumer targeting and relationship creation in the evaluation stage, rather than a purchase stage (Hudson & Thai, 2013). Ongoing discussion and relationship creation can be established and facilitated through social media marketing. Figueiredo and Scaraboto (2016) explored the concept of value creation through the adoption of a circulation-centric perspective that explained systematic value creation in collaborative consumer networks by connecting consumers, their actions, objections, and values. Hajli (2014) found that social media facilitates social interaction leading to increased trust, and that trust had a significant effect on consumer buying intention. Raab, Berezan, Krishen, and Tanford, 2016) suggested that friendly dimensions of communication styles had the greatest impact on loyalty, whereas professional displays resulted in the lowest impact. Social media can

also be used to improve customer loyalty (Raab, Berezan, Krishen, and Tanford, 2016). Schembri and Latimer (2016) found that brand culture creation via social media can be facilitated and fostered to positively impact consumer behavior.

Various authors researched the role of social media interactions played in content and value creation (Arunjo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Malaska, 2015). Brand-consumer interaction creates numerous types of customer value such as customer knowledge value, customer influence value, and customer lifetime value (Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016). Also, electronic networks both support as well as improve interorganizational knowledge exchange and innovation collaboration (Charalabidis, Loukis, and Androutsopoulou, 2014). Arunjo, et al., (2015) explored consumer re-tweeting of content posted by companies. Customers were more likely to share content if the message posted by the company contained information, particularly if the company included a link to a video or website. Therefore, when businesses post valuable content, then customers are more willing to share or re-tweet with their friends and value increases (Arunjo, et al., 2015). However, companies need to train employees on proper social media content creation as a way to grow the brand. If proper training is not provided, the company risks damaging their reputation (Huotari, et al., 2015).

Innovation and Complexity in Social Media Marketing

Chong, Bian and Zhang (2016) noted that typically scholars have investigated e-marketing from a single perspective, and in doing so, often ignore the interrelated aspects that contribute to e-marketing. Early studies on the importance of e-marketing focused on

the importance of leveraging internet technologies, and how, e-marketing is not a one size fits all model (Jap & Mohr, 2002). Jap and Mohr (2002) noted that organizational relationships must be considered when trying to embed internet technologies and that organizations can attempt similar internet marketing strategies yet can experience very different outcomes. Therefore, the internet can play varying roles based on the expected customer-business relationship that exists. Chong, Bian, and Zhang (2016) found that innovation, knowledge complexity, and other factors moderate relationships in e-marketing.

Some authors suggest the synergistic use of social media marketing along with other marketing strategies when possible to create a holistic marketing strategy (Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2014; Fulgoni, 2015; Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, & Kannan, 2016). However, social media marketing can be a valuable low-cost tool used alone when resources are restricted, provided the focal point of social media content captures customer motivations (Fulgoni, 2015; Soyoung, Martinez, McClure, & Soo Hyun, 2016). Small business owners can capture customer motivations in social media through task content, socioemotional content, or a combination of the two (Soyoung, et al., 2016).

Although a synergistic effect is present, social media marketing has the overall positive largest impact not only on increasing sale profitability but also positively influenced the purchase of high-margin products (Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraan, and Kannan, 2016). Also, social media's ability to allow customers a voice, regarding comments and likes, enabled a great level of effectiveness. Jochim's (2016) indicated the importance of social reciprocity as a small business success factor. At the

same time, this reciprocity and social media content must be constructed in a way that meets customer needs and levels of understanding along the lines of perceived usefulness (Andrée, Lauren, & Marsha, 2014; Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). Common problems in social media content included the use of formal language and richness of text outside of the scope of common customers (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014).

Social Media Influence on Consumer Behavior

Kumar, Bezawada, Rishika, Janakiraman, and Kannan (2016) found that social media marketing practices have a positive effect on customer behavior. Social media marketing increased online brand publicity, which could indirectly increase sales (Xie & Lee, 2015). Also, while social media can foster a consumer base of a brand, it is more likely to trigger purchase behavior more so than brand information from traditional media (Xie & Lee, 2015). Kumar, et al., (2016) offered critical management insights on leveraging social media for greater returns illustrating the importance of incorporating social media into marketing practices, and insight on how to better use social media as a marketing tool to increase returns. Also, Fulgoni (2015) found that social media was a useful marketing tool to substitute for traditional advertising, especially when businesses struggled financially, and was a saving factor when used as a last stitch effort to save a failing company or brand. As a result, Fulgomi (2015) suggested that social media has become an essential central tool to marketing.

Tuten and Angermeier (2013) explored the negative elements of consumer behavior associated with social media marketing. In particular, the authors discussed aspects like security breaches, loss of brand content control, the spread of negative press

and word of mouth complaints, as well as potential increases to legal liabilities. The authors conclude that it is necessary to consider not only positive aspects of social media but also the negative components of social media consumer behavior that could detrimentally impact a company. The authors suggest increased awareness of the consequences of negative consumer behavior on social media and mitigate that risk through various means. Negative aspects should be mitigated with active company engagement (Tuten & Angermeier, 2013). Studies suggest consumer behavioral intention is determined by social presence, social support, and experience which are influenced by personalization, perceived interactivity, and sociability (Zhang, Lu, Gupta, & Zhao, 2014). Marketers should also consider specific factors when designing a placing promotional material in social media and carefully select display ads to improve congruity (Zhang & Mao, 2016).

Overall, eWOM communications generated through online social networks travel through networks of influence and are influential in disseminating awareness (Susarla, Oh, & Tan, 2016). A company's exposure on social media sites increased customer's tendency to buy from those particular businesses (Xie & Lee, 2015). These studies are useful to understand how small businesses can adopt social media marketing strategies for increased brand/company awareness, which could, in turn, generate higher returns and an expanded customer base. However, it is important to identify customer motivations as an essential component to understanding and offering appropriate social media messages toward all followers, and not focused solely on active social media users (Soyoung, Martinez, McClure, & Soo Hyun, 2016).

When social media communication is managed properly then brand awareness builds; however, it is necessary for the company to stay actively involved in social media communications (Zailskaite-Jaske & Kuvykaite, 2013). However, Lacoste (2016) found that social media is not being used to its full potential because managers sometimes believe there was a lack of customers requiring communication through social media. and found that others do not recognize social media as a valid tool it is prohibited from being used on company servers and devices.

Small Businesses and Social Media Marketing

In addition to a general discussion of social media marketing, several authors have focused on small business owners' utilization of social media marketing (Alford & Page, 2015; Broekemeir, Chau, & Seshadri, 2015; Charalabidis, Loukis, & Androutsopoulou, 2014). Social media represents a paradigm shift in communication, facilitating more extensive communication at a lower cost (Charalabidis, et al. 2014). The small business sector in the US is a driver of economic growth and job creation, yet little is known about small businesses' social media marketing usage (Broekemeir, et al., 2015). Lack of adoption was often due to lack of knowledge as well as an inability to measure return on investment (Alford & Page, 2015; Gazal, Montague, Poudel, & Wiedenbeck, 2016).

Small Businesses' Importance to Economic Development

Neagu (2016) discussed the importance of small to medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in economic development noting that SMEs represent the backbone of socio-economic progress. SMEs offer an important alternative to fighting unemployment,

representing 99% of the total number of enterprises in most economies throughout the world, and with that, generate the largest number of new jobs (Neagu, 2016). Since 1982, small businesses have increased by 49% within the US economy (SBA, 2016b). Small businesses currently account for 54% of all US sales and represent 55% of all jobs and 66% of net new jobs since the 1970s (SBA, 2016b). Since 1990, small businesses have added eight million new jobs to the US economy, while big businesses have eliminated roughly four million jobs (SBA, 2016b).

SMEs offer unique flexibility and can adapt to changing market requirements much faster than larger companies (Neagu, 2016). However, SMEs often have reduced capital, making them vulnerable to changing economic conditions (Neagu, 2016). At the same time, the US financial crisis in the first decade of the 2000s created an environment where small business lending has become increasingly scarce (Dolar, 2014).

Innovation is key to the basis for small businesses' competitive advantage (Jardon, 2016). Aligning human capital and innovation strategies leads to enhanced performance and often results in competitive advantage and the ability to better adapt to changing environments (Jardon, 2016).

Importance of Marketing in Small Businesses

Authors have used a case study approach to understand small business marketing in various capacities (Horan, O'Dwyer, & Tiernan, 2011; Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Horan, et al. (2011) used a qualitative case study approach to understand brand enhancement in service industry SMEs from a management perspective and illustrated several aspects from a management perspective that impacts the type and quantity of

branding in the service industry. Small business owners tended to take a cautious approach to brand management, loyalty, relationship, and network building due to resource constraints (Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn & Gilmore, 2015).

In service industry SMEs, branding is dominated by four main aspects including the specific characteristic of the company, the role of customer importance, the role of management, and brand equity (Horan et al., 2011). However, values and beliefs of business owners often set the tone for core competencies transmitted through brand identity (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Other factors that hindered branding included budgetary constraints, procrastination, the desire for success, and owner perspective on the influence on change (Horan et al., 2011). Resource constraints often limit product or services that can complement core company values illustrating the ongoing problem of resource constraints in small business marketing (Spence & Essoussi, 2010). Therefore resource constraints demonstrate the importance of low-cost marketing resources such as social media marketing for small businesses, particularly in the service industry, in which the landscape industry is a part.

Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn, and Gilmore (2015) explored the importance for small businesses to stand out in the marketplace and the extent branding plays in that process. Most small business brand marketing focuses on word of mouth (Mitchell, Hutchinson, Quinn & Gilmore, 2015). One way that word of mouth is accomplished in the current marketplace is through social media.

Small Businesses and Social Media Marketing

Charalabidis, et al. (2014) used a qualitative case study approach to explore the conditions necessary for a wider diffusion and adoption of social media innovations with results indicating social media's strong relative advantage over traditional methods regarding enabling a wider customer reach with both reasonable effort and cost. While a relative disadvantage was that like minded individuals often reside in similar social networks, which can limit diversity in customer base (Charalabidis, et al., 2014). Alford and Page (2015) investigated levels of adoption of marketing technology with results indicating that some of the main advantages of online marketing include cost as well as the ability to measure customer action more accurately than traditional forms of marketing. While, disadvantages included a lack of adoption due to a lack of technical competency (Alford & Page, 2015). Broekemeir, Chau, and Seshadri (2015) found that the main purposes of small businesses use of social media marketing was to improve company reputation, increase customer awareness as well as interest, and promote their business to new customers.

Building and maintaining positive relationships are important components to organizational success (Jochims, 2016; Maritz, 2008; Srivoravilai, Melewar, Liu, & Yannopoulou, 2011). Jochims (2016) used a case study approach to explore the importance of social exchange relationships in small businesses and found that work tasks are determined by shared social norms and rules and ultimately represented an important success factor. Chang, Yu, and Lu, (2014) suggested that posts deemed as useful by consumers translated into increased attention and behavior, and suggest

utilizing a variety of social media post types to increase platform diversity. Likewise, Öztamur & Karakadılar (2014) found that in American companies, Facebook tended to be more effective than Twitter in attracting and retaining customer interest. Other studies focused on factors that influenced small business social media usages such as usefulness, ease, and enjoyment of social media usage (Razak, & Latip, 2016).

Maritz (2008) discussed how some small businesses face issues when attempting to expand and manage opportunities for a growing business, and the important role that marketing and relationships play in that expansion. Maritz (2008) proposed a conceptual incorporation of both relationship marketing along with service quality, with results indicating that relationship marketing is positively associated with service quality and the development of a relationship management chain should be developed to facilitate relationship management. Srivoravilai, et al. (2011) also found positive effects of perceived organizational legitimacy and positive impression management.

Atanassova and Clark (2015) noted that valuable implications exist for both small businesses' utilization of social media. Whereas bigger organizations often employ traditional marketing theory with a top down, long term growth marketing approach, small businesses often incorporate a bottom up, simple, short-term survivalist marketing approach (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Roy, Maxwell, and Carson (2014) outlined the primary uses of social media marketing in the small-scale tourist industry as a conveyance of education and information to both new and existing customers.

Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) found that that competitive pressure did not significantly influence social media usage, which indicated that competition was not a

driving force. Research investigating conditions where competitive pressure might factor into social media usage might be beneficial (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Unlike bigger organizations, Atanassova and Clark, (2015) indicated there is greater importance for small businesses to employ dynamic, continuous communication since resource constraints often limit small business's marketing potential. Networking practices, such as social media, has the potential to overcome constraints by facilitating innovation, contacts, development, and strategic partnerships (Atanassova & Clark, 2015).

Andrée, Lauren, and Marsha (2014) noted that small businesses need to use social media to sustain their day-to-day operations. Benefits of social media utilization included enhanced customer relationships, increase in new customers, enhanced ability to reach customers on a global scale, increased brand equity, and co-promotion of local businesses in the area (Gorgani, 2016; Jones, Borgman, & Ulusoy, 2015).

Social media can have a large economic impact on small businesses particularly in economically underserved areas (Gorgani, 2016; Jones, Borgman, & Ulusoy, 2015). Some of the greatest challenges to small businesses in social media adoption were the lack of time, money, or expertise to reach their target markets cost effectively (Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015; Marzuki, Langgat, & Fabeil, 2014).

Social Media Marketing in Landscape Industry Small Businesses

The landscape industry provides landscape, design, and maintenance products and services on both commercial and residential levels. Products include commercial and residential services, design build, arborist services, fertilization, landscape installation and maintenance, tree planting, pruning, spray services, and others (IBISWorld, 2016). A

2014 survey reported that landscape businesses were 65% residential, 23% commercial (Lawn & Landscape, 2014). The largest area of landscape industry revenue encompassed 42% maintenance, 19% design/build, 13% lawn care, 6% tree services, 6% snow removal services, and 6% irrigation services (Lawn & Landscape, 2014).

The landscape industry is a large and growing field encompassing \$78 billion in annual revenues, with an annual growth rate of about 3.9% (IBISWorld, 2016; National Association of Landscape Professionals, 2016). The landscape industry includes approximately 474,000 businesses, and over 969,000 employees (IBISWorld, 2016; National Association of Landscape Professionals, 2016). The average landscape company employs approximately 15 individuals and brings in approximately \$1 million in annual revenue with a net profit of 11% (Lawn & Landscape, 2014). Despite its enormity, surprisingly little to no peer-reviewed research has been conducted on the landscape industry.

Although few to no peer reviewed articles have documented social media usage in the landscape industry specifically, trade industry articles have begun to discuss the importance of utilizing social media within the landscape industry to attract customers. Jacobs, Geraci, and Hall (2011) noted how social media utilization is becoming increasingly important given the increased business activity on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Canary (2016) outlined the importance of using Instagram, showcase projects enabling Instagram to become a portfolio, and noted one limitation that tends to dissuade landscape companies is the inability to embed links to websites within Instagram.

Wilson (2012) discussed the benefits of landscape industry businesses using Facebook, LinkedIn, and an online blog. For each method, the author suggested reviewing weekly analytics and metrics for the site to ensure that these tools are being used efficiently. Like Canary (2016), Wilson (2012) recognized the importance of embedded links, noting that each social media page should link to others. Jacobs, Geraci, and Hall (2011) discussed how some companies are even outsourcing social media marketing to smaller vendors who can control content and respond to customers. While, the small business sector in the US continues to be a driver of economic growth and job creation, Broekemeir, et al., (2015) noted that little scholarly research exists documenting the adoption of landscape small businesses' social media marketing and its influence in generating positive market outcomes.

Transition

Overall, these previous studies demonstrated how small businesses in various industries such as tourism, restaurants, and others have used online and social media marketing tools as part of their overall marketing activities (Perry, 2014; Shang, 2014). However, there is lack of research in social media marketing strategies within landscape industry small businesses. For some small landscape industry business, a lack of physical building, lower resources to devote to marketing, and site to site service provisions might limit the resources and exposure they can devote to marketing. Social media marketing can be adopted as a viable tool to enable these types of small businesses to gain visibility in their service area and build strong social exchange networks to better succeed in the larger marketplace.

The next section will outline specific aspects of the research methodology and design used in this study to explore how landscape industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability. The next section also outlines the role of the researcher, participants, population and sample, as well as ethical, reliability, and validity considerations.

Section 2: The Project

For this project, I explored how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. In this section, I explain the project, my role as researcher, the participants, the research method and design, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, reliability, and validity.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. For this study, I measured success or efficacious use of social media through active social media participation. I defined active as an average of at least one social media post each month that elicited two-way communication. The sample for this study was four landscape industry small business owners located in Auburn, Alabama, who have been efficacious in their use of social media marketing tools as part of their overall marketing strategy. The implications for social change include increasing the viability of landscape small businesses in the local economy through the use of social media marketing strategies. Social change could arise in the form of derivative local economic improvements. These economic improvements could lead to enhancements in both quality of life and other improvements in the local community.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative study, the researcher assumes the role of a data collection instrument (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, I

analyzed the qualitative multiple case study data in a way that created understanding and furthered knowledge in the field. Yilmaz (2013) explained how a researcher's role includes data collection and analysis through inductive reasoning. My role in this study was to collect and analyze data through semistructured interviews and social media content analysis to achieve a contextual understanding through the use of inductive reasoning. By collecting data from various sources, the researcher can triangulate the case study data (Perry, 1998; Yin, 2014).

My role was also to minimize bias through remaining objective and maintaining a neutral role, as well as adherence to ethics guidelines outlined in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). Yin (2014) noted the importance of identifying personal experiences relevant to the topic and relationships with the participants. For this study, I had no relationship with the topic or participants, which mitigated any potential bias before beginning the research. Bracketing is also an important component to mitigating bias during the data collection phase (Perry, 1998; Yin, 2014). Given my limited experience in social media marketing before conducting the study, I focused on mitigating potential bias by conducting a comprehensive literature review before beginning the data collection phase. Member checking also helps to reduce bias by ensuring that the participant interview data used in the study is what the participant meant to say. In this study, I used bracketing and member checking to minimize bias through adhering to a semistructured interview protocol, transcribing participants' interview responses, and member checking information by having participants review their responses for accuracy

I also followed the ethical principles and guidelines in the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The ethical guidelines included obtaining consent from individual participants, ensuring benefits were maximized and risks minimized, and ensuring participant safety and confidentiality throughout the research process. I completed the Protecting Human Research Subjects training, and to ensure I followed the ethical principles and guidelines, I submitted my proposal to the Walden University institutional review board for approval.

Participants

Participants included four landscape industry small business owners located in Auburn, Alabama, who had been efficacious in their use of social media marketing tools as part of their overall marketing strategy. For this study, success or efficacious use of social media was measured through active social media participation. Active was defined as at an average of at least one social media post each month that elicited two-way communication.

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to recruit participants who met the selection criteria. A purposeful sampling technique with a small sample size was beneficial for capturing in-depth information on business owners' experiences with social media (Cleary, Horsfull, & Hayter, 2014; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Robinson, 2014). Participants were solicited after a review of social media websites for landscape industry small businesses in the area. Participants were initially solicited through their social media sites with follow-up emails and private messaging. I established a working

relationship with participants by explaining the purpose of my study, remaining flexible to their busy schedules, and being receptive to the information provided.

I ensured that the participants' characteristics aligned with my research question in several ways. First, I actively sought small businesses in the Auburn, Alabama area through their social media sites to confirm that the small businesses use social media. I then approached the business owner to see if he or she met the characteristics of being a small business owner for at least 5 years who has successfully used social media as a marketing strategy.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

I used a qualitative method to explore how landscape industry small business owners use social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. Given that this study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of why and how social media marketing strategies are used, a qualitative method was more appropriate than a quantitative method (Bettiol, Di Maria, & Finotto, 2012; O'Donnell, 2014; Yin, 2014). If the focus was on whether social media marketing was used, or on another quantifiable factor, then the quantitative method would have been appropriate. Given that the focus of this study was gaining an in-depth understanding of how and why landscape industry small business owners are using social media marketing strategies, with no quantifiable variables, the mixed-methods approach was also not appropriate.

Research Design

I used a qualitative exploratory multiple case study design to explore how landscape industry small business owners use social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. The rationale for using a qualitative case study design was to obtain an in-depth understanding of how and why landscape industry small business owners used social media marketing strategies. Researchers use multiple sources of evidence in a case study to answer the research questions (Gog, 2105; Perry, 1998; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). A qualitative exploratory multiple case study design was most appropriate to conduct this study because I used multiple sources of evidence to understand of the business problem. Exploratory case studies are appropriate when little information is available (Gog, 2105; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). Results generated from exploratory case studies serve as a basis for subsequent research studies (Yin, 2014). Incorporating data from a variety of sources strengthened the understanding of landscape industry small businesses owners' successful use of online marketing strategies.

Using a multiple case study design ensures data saturation by providing more substantial data that allows for comprehensive analysis and pattern repetition (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Yin, 2014). The researcher achieves data saturation when similar patterns repeat and no new information has emerged (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Multiple case studies can result in more powerful analytic conclusions (Gog, 2015; Perry, 1998; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). For this study, a multiple case study approach was more appropriate to answer the research question than a single case study because I analyzed four small businesses' social media activity. The data collection for this study included

semistructured interviews and analysis of the social media tools and records used in each small business. Data saturation was ensured through member checking. I provided a synthesis of the participant's responses to ensure the intended responses were presented. The member checking follow-up process continued until no new information was obtained.

A phenomenological design was not appropriate for the study because researchers who use phenomenological designs focus primarily on interviews to explore the lived experiences of participants. For example, Doern (2016) explored the lived experiences of small businesses during the 2011 London riots. Doern focused on a specific event, which was different from obtaining a general understanding of landscape industry small businesses owners' successful use of online marketing strategies. Similarly, researchers use ethnographic designs to explore cultural elements of a given phenomenon (Watson, 2011). Although occupational culture is an element of landscape industry small businesses, culture was beyond the scope of this study of how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used innovative social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability.

Population and Sampling

The population for this study included landscape industry small businesses located in the Auburn, Alabama metro area with fewer than 50 employees. Participants were solicited following an initial search for landscape industry small businesses social media sites in the Auburn, Alabama metro area. Dworkin (2012) noted that a small sample size is important in qualitative study to focus on an in-depth understanding. I used

a multiple case study design with a sample of four small business owners in the landscape industry who had successfully used social media marketing strategies.

I used a purposive sampling strategy based on the following criteria: (a) small business in the landscape industry; (b) located in the Auburn, Alabama metro area; and (c) efficacious social media use. Researchers use purposive sampling when selecting participants based on specific criteria (Fischer & Reuber, 2010; Sanderson & Lea, 2012). In this study, a multiple case study was more appropriate than a single case study because it allowed me to capture and analyze rich data from multiple participants. Analyzing multiple participants' data ensured data saturation by providing more substantial data for comprehensive analysis and pattern repetition (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014).

Ethical Research

Research began when I received approval from Walden University's institutional review board. The approval number for this study was #11-03-17-0487630. Yin (2014) described the importance of including a written consent form and confidentiality statement so that participants understand that their participation is voluntary and they can withdraw from the study at any time. I used a written consent form and confidentiality statement that was given to participants. I outlined the process for withdrawing from the study to ensure participants' understanding. The process for withdrawing was for the participant to call or e-mail me indicating that he or she was no longer interested in participating in the study, and I would delete all information related to the participant.

I offered an incentive for participants to participate in the study. Thomas and Magilvy (2011) discussed the importance of providing participants a copy of the study findings. I offered a copy of the study findings to all participants.

To ensure confidentiality, no business, organization, or individual names or other personal identifiers were included in the study documents or notes from interviews and social media content analysis. Participant case numbers were assigned to all documents to ensure confidentiality. I coded the names of individuals and organizations using alpha-numeric codes to protect the identities of the owners and businesses. Data containing only participant numbers were stored in an online file and in a locked computer at my place of residence, and the online file required a password that was not shared with anyone. I will delete the file after 5 years to ensure the confidentiality of participants and minimize any potential risk to participants. I will also destroy the paper files after the 5 years by shredding the files and disposing of them.

Data Collection Instruments

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011; Yin, 2014). Because I conducted a qualitative multiple case study, I served as the primary data collection instrument. Incorporating data from a variety of sources was intended to strengthen the general understanding of landscape industry small businesses owners' successful use of online marketing strategies. The data collection for the study included a semistructured interviews and analysis of social media tools and strategies used by participants. I used member checking to ensure reliability and validity. by providing a synthesis of the participants' responses to ensure the synthesis

represented the participants' intended responses. The member checking follow-up process continued until no new information was obtained and I had achieved data saturation.

Interview Questions

1. How do you typically use social media as part of your marketing strategy?
2. How does social media marketing fit into your overall marketing mix?
3. How do you know if certain social media marketing strategies that you use are more successful than others?
4. What were your greatest challenges to successfully implementing social media marketing strategies?
5. How did you address those challenges?
6. What are some of the greatest benefits of using social media marketing as part of your marketing strategy?
7. What additional information that we have not already discussed might be pertinent to this study on how you use social media marketing?

Data Collection Technique

I used semi structured interviews and content analysis of the social media sites of the landscape industry small businesses included in this study as a data collection technique. Crawford (1997) noted the importance of researcher knowledge of daily schedule, seasonal activities and work habits of participants. The research followed a specified interview protocol to ensure reliability. I first contacted potential participants through their social media sites. Initial contact through social media offered an advantage

because given that this is a social media marketing study, it was important to understand the level of online two-way engagement of the participants. A disadvantage to using social media for initial contact is that I could have potentially missed out on a participant that might not respond to a social media request.

Once a participant agreed to participate in the study, he/she was given consent forms and the interview questionnaire, which were returned to me in a manner most convenient to the participant, some of the responses were verbally captured, while others were emailed or captured in online message correspondence. I reviewed the responses and asked any necessary clarifying questions. An advantage of using a dual technique of semi structured interviews and review of the responses with the participant for clarification question purposes, was that the participant was able to clarify their intended responses ensuring reliability and validity. One potential disadvantage of allowing participants to review their responses was that the participants were able to change their originally intended answers to be portrayed in a different way. However, the risk of participants changing their responses to be portrayed differently was minimal given that this study did not include sensitive material, and no participants changed their responses, although some did clarify or provide further detail on some of their responses. The follow-up session acted as part of the member-checking protocol. I included a data-collection protocol in Appendix A. I collected additional data from social media sites following the interview data-collection process.

Data Organization Technique

A researcher can organize data into groups as well as common themes (Demassis & Kotlar, 2014; Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). Data collected from the interviews and social media sites were organized electronically first in MS Excel into groups by participant, and later sorted into common themes. I coded the names of individuals and organization using an alpha numeric code to protect the names of the owners and businesses. I stored the data in Excel spreadsheets as well as NVivo and kept any original notes to ensure a backup of information.

Data Analysis

Tumele (2015) noted the importance of having an analytical strategy to data analysis so that data can be analyzed in a clear and organized way. For multiple case study research, raw data should be initially collected, coded, and stored by individual case (Demassis & Kotlar, 2014; Yin, 2014). Given that this study was a multiple case study, I began the data analysis process by organizing, labeling, and coding the data for each case utilizing MS Excel followed by the NVivo software. I also used MS Excel to back up the data.

Bekhet and Zauszniewski (2012) noted the importance of using methodological triangulation to improve data analysis. Yin (2014) outlined a post-data collection process of organizing and coding data, identifying themes, and drawing conclusions. A researcher can ensure data saturation through the use of methodological triangulation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). I used methodological triangulation of social media and interview data collected from each case to ensure data saturation.

Demassis and Kotlar (2014) discussed the process of exploring the data to extrapolate common themes. I looked for common themes within the coded data in NVivo to begin the data interpretation process. Key themes that emerge from the data should be cross referenced against theoretical material outlined in the literature (Borrego, Foster, & Froyd, 2014). I explored the potential existence of common themes first within each case, and, next, across multiple cases.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

A researcher can achieve reliability and validity of multiple case study in various ways. During the data collection process, the researcher can achieve reliability by following a case-study interview protocol and organizing data in a database (Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). In this study, I ensured reliability by creating an interview protocol and database for data collected to ensure that all data were collected and stored utilizing the same coding and collection process.

Member checking is the process of participants' review of their own interview answers and interpretation to ensure reliability (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011; Jonsen & Jehn, 2009; Yin, 2014). Kikooma (2010) noted the importance of documenting each step in the research process and data collection to ensure reliability. In this study, I used bracketing and member checking to assist in data reliability through adhering to a semi structured interview process, using participants' exact wording through written responses, documenting additional information, and completing the

process of member checking information by having participants review their responses for accuracy.

Validity

In qualitative research, a research achieves validity by addressing issues of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and by ensuring data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Yin, 2014). Researchers using a case-study approach construct validity through data collection and composition via utilization of multiple sources of evidence and establishing a chain of evidence (Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). In this study, I collected multiple sources of data to ensure construct validity. I achieved credibility through data triangulation. Researchers incorporate internal validity in the data analysis phase through proper coding, pattern matching, and explanation building (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Tumele, 2015). In this study, I ensured internal validity by creating a coding process in NVivo and Excel to ensure data were accurately coded using a set protocol.

Transferability is the applicability of research results to other settings (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Mitchell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I ensured transferability through clearly outlining and following the interview protocol, as well as identifying the limitations of this research study (Thomas & Maglivi, 2011). I also addressed issues of transferability through clearly detailing the sample, data collection, and coding process. In qualitative studies, researchers leave transferability of research findings to the reader and future researchers (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I left the transferability of findings to the reader.

External validity can be achieved through the research design itself, particularly in the incorporation of replication logic and theory, also enabling confirmability (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Gog, 2015; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). In this study, I ensured external validity by utilizing a multiple case study approach with various forms of data collection to ensure confirmability as well as data saturation. Utilizing a multiple case study design helped to ensure data saturation by providing more substantial data allowing for a more comprehensive analysis and pattern repetition (Fusch & Ness, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Yin, 2014).

The researcher achieves data saturation when similar patterns repeat and no new information has emerged (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Multiple case studies could result in more powerful analytic conclusions and the beginnings theoretical replication (Gog, 2015; Perry, 1998; Tumele, 2015; Yin, 2014). Data saturation was also achieved through member checking (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For the purposes of this study, I provided a synthesis of the participants' responses to ensure the synthesis represents the participant's intended responses and any additional information necessary, which also contributed to the confirmability of the study (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). The member-checking follow-up process continued until no new information was obtained.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. The population for this study was a sample of four

landscape industry small business owners located in Auburn, Alabama, who have been efficacious in their use of social media marketing tools as part of their overall marketing strategy. Additional key aspects of this section included the role of researcher, data collection, and organization techniques. Following the interview protocol as well as the data collection and analysis process ensured overall reliability and validity of the study. In the next section, I will present the findings of how landscape industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability by exploring common themes uncovered in the data.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. Four cases used in this study were designated as CS1, CS2, CS3, and CS4. Section 3 begins with a presentation of the major findings including landscape industry small business marketing strategies, types of social media used, social media content and rationale, and the benefits and challenges of social media use. Next, I explain how the results of this study on landscape industry small business' marketing strategy are applicable to business practice. I also discuss the findings' applicability to social change and offer recommendations for action. Finally, I offer recommendations for future research and provide final reflections on the study.

Presentation of the Findings

The central research question for this study was as follows: How do landscape industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability? Data analysis revealed several key themes: Theme 1 was social media use as part of an overall marketing strategy, Theme 2 was the primary types of social media used, Theme 3 was social media content, and Theme 4 was the benefits and challenges of social media use. In the following sections, I describe the major themes and subthemes and explain how they relate to theory, effective business practice, and social change.

Theme 1: Marketing Strategy Adoption

The results of an exploration of landscape industry small business cases revealed three subthemes related to marketing strategy adoption. The first subtheme, and focus of this project, was social media use. However, other major marketing strategies used by landscape industry small businesses in this study and captured in the analysis included a secondary subtheme of word of mouth marketing, as well as a third subtheme that encompassed miscellaneous types of marketing such as newspaper, Yellow Book, and other paper-based strategies. Although the second and third subthemes were not the focus of this study, the findings were worth mentioning.

Subtheme 1A: social media marketing. The landscape industry small business owners all used social media marketing in some form as part of their overall marketing strategy. The types of social media used included Facebook, a company website, Twitter, and Instagram. However, the extent to which social media was used varied by case. For example, CS3 noted that social media marketing was used for “more than half of all my marketing” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). CS1 primarily relied on word-of-mouth referrals, and noted “I rely on word of mouth for referrals, so we do not do a whole lot of marketing” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). These word-of-mouth referrals occurred both through in-person communication as well as through social media. CS1 also noted the importance of social media as “a placement aspect of marketing, in that hopefully more people in our area are aware of our service” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). Table 1 illustrates results that revealed that three out of the four participants used social media marketing in some form, throughout their years

of operation, with one case participant beginning to use social media marketing in the last 5 years despite being in operation for over 10 years.

Table 1

Years in Operation and Social Media Used

Case	Operation	Facebook	Website	Twitter	Instagram
CS1	12	8	12	4	3
CS2	6	6	6	*	*
CS3	8	8	8	3	*
CS4	13	5	*	*	*

Note. * indicates that information was not applicable due to the company not using that type of social media.

Subtheme 1B: word-of-mouth marketing, which often included social media.

Although the extent of word-of-mouth marketing varied based on case, there was uniformity in the fact that all four participants used and noted the importance of social media marketing. Word-of-mouth referral was an interesting finding because it encompassed both social media marketing through service reviews and traditional word-of-mouth marketing through friends and family. CS4 noted “I guess I just take pride in publicly posting my work and seeing who looks at them and likes them in hope that they would want to hire me in the future” (Personal Communication, January 17, 2018). CS4’s statement highlighted the importance of word-of-mouth marketing in that he was able to start a word-of-mouth referral through pictures, and when multiple people “liked” a picture he was able to promote his company’s work. Likewise, CS2 noted “when customers see my work and like my posts, then other potential customers will sometimes call and say ‘I saw this rock bed you did on Facebook’ and then want something similar”

(Personal Communication, December 16, 2017). Followership and likability were very important factors in terms of word-of-mouth marketing as it related to social media marketing and expansion of customer base.

Subtheme 1C: miscellaneous marketing with little success. All of the participants had previously attempted other marketing strategies with little to no success. Both CS2 and CS3 used newspaper and/or community magazine advertisements (CS2, Personal Communication, December 16, 2017; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). CS3 noted, “I thought a community magazine would be a good place to advertise, however, I later found out from customers that they really don’t even look at those when they come in the mail” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). CS3 also noted the high cost associated with community magazines and how “it ended up being a huge waste of the limited money I have for advertising” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017).

CS1 used other print media such as a Yellow Book, with little success, and stated “we have recently done away with the Yellow Book and Yellow Pages...[they] both used a telemetric system to record your phone calls and give you monthly lead tracker results” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). CS4 used print media in the form of door hanger advertisements with limited success and noted, “I go door to door promoting and sometimes that works well, it just depends” (Personal Communication, January 17, 2018). All participants noted the importance of word of mouth in small business success rates, as little can be measured through print media because customers do not have the opportunity to chime in and offer their support for the company.

How marketing strategy themes relate to theory and effective business

practice. The marketing strategy results in this study aligned with Surma's (2016) findings on the importance of online social networks in business base creation and the implications of social media marketing adoption to help sustain strong customer networks. Creating a stronger relationship presence on the front end of product or service considerations is important given that product and service perceptions can limit customer adoption (Ramirez, 2013). Having the possibility of two-way exchanges was highlighted with great importance by participants in this study, as they offered a way to highlight strong customer service as well as other company benefits to customers.

In the context of social exchange theory, researchers suggested that social exchange for increased value will positively influence consumer engagement in the brand, particularly if there is a perception of some benefit, accessibility, and relevance (Bronner & de Hoog, 2014; Hajli, 2014; Lacoste, 2016; Simon et al., 2016). When analyzing the participants' experiences with social media as a marketing strategy, I noticed a direct alignment with social exchange theory in that seeing customer reviews creates an online word-of-mouth movement that promotes relevance and benefit for the potential customer. The differences outlined in the literature between social media and a traditional marketing platform of one-way exchanges highlighted one of the unique aspects of social media marketing, which includes the adoption of a bidirectional communication exchange between business and consumer (Chang et al. 2014; Csordas & Gati, 2014). Social media represents a paradigm shift in the adoption of communication

and social exchange, facilitating an effective business practice of more extensive communication at a lower cost (Charalabidis et al., 2014).

Theme 2: Primary Types of Social Media Used

The second major theme included the primary types of social media used. Social media use was divided between two subthemes. The first subtheme was the use of Facebook as a social media marketing strategy. All participants used Facebook as a primary social media marketing tool. The second subtheme included all other social media tools such as Instagram, Twitter, and a company website.

An interesting finding regarding the primary types of social media used was that despite Facebook being the primary social media tool, many of the companies had also briefly used other social media marketing types as well, either currently or in the past. CS1 noted “we use Facebook and Instagram to keep our name out there” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). Although content data analysis revealed that CS1 also has a company website, the participant never mentioned their website at all. A follow-up question-and-answer session revealed that although CS1 does have a company website, it is rarely used because there is no opportunity to talk to customers (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). Table 2 illustrates the main types of social media used in each case.

Table 2

Type of Social Media Used by Case

Case	Twitter	Facebook	Company website	Instagram
CS1	yes*	yes	yes**	yes*
CS2	no	yes	yes**	no
CS3	yes	yes	yes**	no
CS4	no	yes	no	no

Note. * indicates site is not currently used; **site no longer active.

Subtheme 2A: Facebook as a major social media tool. In all cases, participants noted Facebook as their primary social media tool. CS1 has used social media tools and noted Facebook as the best way to reach a customer base (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). CS1 noted

Facebook shows the reach of your posts and the insights on the statistics/demographics of who and how many people have seen your posts.

Facebook insights will also tell you what days and what time of the day are best to reach the most people.

In addition, CS3 noted “Facebook works best as I can get my customers to follow my page but I have not had as much luck with Twitter or Instagram” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). In all cases, participants appreciated the ease of using Facebook. CS2 appreciated the ability for customers to directly message through the Facebook page:

I get a lot of customers who see work I did on someone’s Facebook page, then they message me directly. It saves the customer time because they don’t have to

look up my phone number, they can just click a button rather than having to place a phone call.

Many participants noted that most of their customer base has a Facebook page of their own, unlike other social media tools such as Twitter or Instagram that appeal to a more limited audience.

Subtheme 2B: other social media tools (Instagram, Twitter, website). Despite the noted lack of customer use of Twitter or Instagram, most participants reported that they did use other forms of social media such as Instagram, Twitter, or a personal company website to reach and expand their customer base. CS1, CS2, and CS3 indicated that they have a personal company website; however, their websites were no longer active (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018; CS2, Personal Communication, December 16, 2017; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017; Table 2). Participants noted that it was difficult to assess website traffic and there was a lack of two-way communication as experienced through Facebook. CS2 noted “no one can get a hold of me on my website so I just stopped using it” (Personal Communication, December 16, 2017). CS3 noted “before I had Facebook, I only had a company website, but there wasn’t any traffic. One of my customers actually told me I need a Facebook page so people can write on it” (Personal Communication, December, 3, 2017).

Although some participants had used Twitter at one point, only CS3 continued to use Twitter as a social media tool, but specifically noted “I have not had as much luck with Twitter” primarily due to a lack of followers and comments on posts (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). Even though participants used Facebook to post

pictures of their services, none of the participants used Instagram despite Instagram being a picture-based social media tool. Participants noted not having very many customers and/or followers who regularly used the site.

How social media use aligns with theory and effective business practices.

Social media has changed the way companies implement their customer relationship management practices (Dewan & Ramaprasad, 2014; Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2016). According to the current study participants, the type of social media adopted was largely impacted by two-way communication channels within each social media tool. A lack of two-way activity noted by participants in the use of company websites, Twitter, and Instagram aligned with previous research noting the importance of two-way communication in social media use (Chang et al. 2014; Csordas & Gati, 2014).

Although there are several important aspects of social media marketing adoption, certain factors hinder or slow the adoption process (Franklin, 2014; Pechrová et al., 2015; Verheyden & Goeman, 2013). In the current study, the types of social media used by customers became of primary factor in successful company adoption of that social media tool. Effective business practice became a balancing act to manage the best and most effective two-way communication tools available and regularly used by customer and businesses. For example, Facebook was more effective than a company's website because customers were more likely to be on Facebook.

Theme 3: Social Media Content

Participants' social media content fell into three common themes across all cases. These themes included services offered, educational postings, and holiday posts. Table 3

illustrates the breakdown of the number of times each case used these social media content themes. These themes were measured through a content analysis of the last six months of each participant's Facebook page.

Table 3

Social Media Facebook Posts by Topic During a 6 Month Period (July-December 2017)

Case	Services	Educational	Holiday
CS1	18 (67%)	3 (11%)	6 (22%)
CS2	11 (79%)	3 (21%)	0 (0%)
CS3	9 (60%)	3 (20%)	3 (20%)
CS4	12 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	50 (74%)	9 (13%)	9 (13%)

Social media content Subtheme 3A: posts about services. All three cases posted primarily about services offered. Services included general landscaping, irrigation, as well as flower and bed installation. As illustrated in Table 3, posts about services offered or performed made up 74% of all Facebook posts across all four cases. Within cases, CS1 posted about services 67% of the time, CS2 posted about services 79% of the time, CS3 posted about services 60% of the time, and CS4 posted about services 100% of the time (Table 3).

Social media content Subtheme 3B: educational posts. Educational posts made up about 13% of the total Facebook posts, across cases, during the six-month period. Educational post content included articles, links, or general posts to aimed to educate customers. CS1 and CS3 both noted that it is often a challenge to find educational content that was informative, yet at a level that someone with little industry knowledge could

understand (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). CS1 noted, “finding articles that are not strictly based for our industry and aren’t ‘over the customer’s head’ has been a challenge” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). Interestingly, CS1, CS2, and CS3, each posted educational content three times over the six-month period, making up 11%, 21%, and 20%, respectively (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018; (CS2, Personal Communication, December 16, 2017; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017; Table 3).

Social media content Subtheme 3C: holiday posts. As illustrated in Table 3, holiday posts made up about 13% of the total posts across cases and included aspects like Merry Christmas, Happy Fourth of July, and other holiday themed posts. Also included in this holiday post category were company and employee birthday and anniversary posts. Only CS1 and CS3 posted holiday posts, at 22% and 20% of their total posts, respectively (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017; Table 3).

How the social media content aligns with theory and effective business practices. It is not surprising that Table 3 illustrated that 74% of the cases Facebook posts were service based posts, given the opportunity for new and continued business-customer relationships, resulting in content and value creation as noted through social exchange theory (Arunjo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Malaska, 2015; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015; Surma, 2016). In particular, Surma (2016) discussed how aspects such as “liking” a post

is a low-cost activity that allows information to travel, not only across those in the business's Facebook network, but often to the customer's Facebook network as well, who often see what their friends have "liked".

Likewise, researchers have suggested that the adoption of online marketing increased customer brand loyalty through the promotion of social relationships among users testing for the effect of network embeddedness on pro-community behaviors (Jing-Yu, Ming, Bing-Sheng, and Xing-Dong, 2014). When service, education, and holiday social exchanges take place through social media posts, overall visibility increases. The idea of brand loyalty came across not only in terms of the visibility of services, but also in terms of learning through educational posts, and a sense of pro-community behaviors with holiday posts.

Theme 4: Benefits and Challenges of Social Media as a Marketing Strategy

The benefits and challenges to using social media as marketing strategy were surprisingly similar across all four cases. The major benefits included the social media as a low-cost marketing option, and a strategy to improve visibility to increase customer base and improve customer retention. The major challenges included the trial and error type learning curve associated with social media marketing, as well as the ability, or inability, to direct customers to their social media sites (CS1, Personal Communication, January 12, 2018; CS2, Personal Communication, December 16, 2017; CS3, Personal Communication, December 3, 2017; CS4, Personal Communication, January 17, 2018).

Benefit Subtheme 4A: low cost. One of the greatest benefits discussed by all participants was the ability to use social media at a relatively low and often times no cost.

CS 1 stated, “It is free! It has also increased our list of potential clients” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). Likewise, CS3 noted, “The best thing about using social media is that it’s free. That once my customers caught on they shared my information with their friends. It eventually spread via word of mouth which kept my advertising costs down” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). The theme of social media at a low cost was noted first by every single participant.

As researchers have noted, online social networks are an ideal platform for social exchange due to the opportunity for new and continued business-customer relationships at a relatively low cost to businesses and create important social exchanges (Arunjo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart, 2015; Hamilton, Kaltcheva, & Rohm, 2016; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi, and Malaska, 2015; Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015; Surma, 2016).

Benefit Subtheme 4B: visibility. Social media is a powerful marketing channel to improve visibility enabling information diffusion, cohesion, and relationship building (Ananda, Hernandez-Garcia, & Lamberti, 2016; Chang, Yu, & Lu, 2014). CS1 noted multiple benefits to increased visibility, “It has also increased our list of potential clients. Social Media marketing has also given us ideas for services few others in our area are offering. In addition, potential employees can see pictures of what we do and our quality of work. Pictures of our work on social media also really help with potential clients “visualizing” what we can do on their property” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). CS3 combined the usefulness of visibility with increased word of mouth, “once my customers caught on they shared my information with their friends. It eventually

spread via word of mouth which kept my advertising costs down” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017).

Small business leaders have used social media marketing to promote themselves to increase viability and sustainability through increased visibility, to survive in a competitive climate (Taneja & Toombs, 2004). This self-promotion and increased visibility through a visual representation of work was noted by several of the participants. CS4 noted, “pictures are important so people can see what I am capable of producing. Especially in my field, I can have a fancy webpage but that won’t do me any good because people won’t really know what I am capable of doing” (Personal Communication, January 17, 2018).

Challenge Subtheme 4C: social media as a series of trial and error. Evidence indicates that as small businesses become immersed in social media marketing, they become a stronger market contender by acquiring market intelligence (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Yet, the adoption of social media best practices in small business continues to be deficient (Shang, 2014). The question is why? This was answered through a major challenge noted by several of the participants in terms of having to learn by trial and error to see what works and what does not work in the world of social media marketing. CS4 noted a major challenge as “figuring out how to successfully set up the pages myself and also how to generate likes and followers to get people to have interest in my page” (Personal Communication, January 17, 2018).

Likewise, CS1 noted, the “greatest challenge was having the time to come up with creative, intriguing posts to engage people to hopefully increase your reach. Also, finding

articles that are not strictly based for our industry and are ‘over the customer’s head’ has been a challenge” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018). CS1 went so far as to use a younger employee to run their social media sites, “I have delegated the social media aspect of the business to our 22-year-old employee, who is likely more knowledgeable about the in’s and out’s and tricks of the trade (like hashtags) of posting on social media. She seems to be able to do it much more quickly and more effectively than I did. She also has more time in her work week to do that” (Personal Communication, January 12, 2018).

Challenge Subtheme 4D: directing customers to social media sites. As CS2 noted, one of the “greatest challenges was getting my customers on board. I had to let them know it was out there and had to ask for them to follow my page” (Personal Communication, December 16, 2017). This sentiment was also noted by CS3 who noted, “I think social media has a place but at the same time a manager or owner needs to know when it’s appropriate. For example, if you have or target older more traditional customers they might not know how to use social media so you also need to have traditional advertising. However, if your target audience is social media savvy then it’s the way to go” (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017).

How benefits and challenges align with theory and effective business practices. Researchers have noted aspects to social media marketing adoption in terms elements that hinder or slow the adoption process (Franklin, 2014; Pechrová, Lohr, & Havlíček, 2015; Verheyden & Goeman, 2013). Potential reasons for the lack of adoption included a lack of understanding, familiarity with possibilities, and lack of experiences

using social media (Pechrová, et al., 2015). The challenges presented in each case aligned with these challenges noted by Pechrová, et al. (2015). However, these challenges were also ones that these particular participants were able to overcome. Not all small businesses have the time or resources to learn to mitigate the challenges involved in social media marketing. So, while effective business practice might be to adopt social media marketing, the obstacles might be insurmountable to some who lack computer literacy or other resources to adequately create and maintain a social media presence.

Applications to Professional Practice

Increased use of landscape industry small businesses' social media marketing strategies could contribute to business practice in various ways. The specific business problem was that some landscape industry small business owners lack strategies for adopting innovative social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. Overall, as noted in the literature and supported in this study, small business social media marketing facilitates an effective business practice by providing a means to more extensive two-way communication at a lower cost than traditional marketing routes.

The findings from this study indicated that can social media, when matched with market usage, can be a valuable tool to add to the overall marketing strategy. As CS3 noted, social media marketing has its place, and its successful utilization is dependent on the demographics of the larger market the company is trying to capture (Personal Communication, December 3, 2017). Facebook was the most used social media tool, so while some participants attempted to use other forms of social media, those attempts were often unsuccessful because it did not capture the types of social media that customers

were using. Therefore, the findings from this study contribute to the effective practice of business by demonstrating which social media marketing tools are most effective for landscape small businesses.

In addition, the low-cost nature of some social media sites, such as Facebook, provide an opportunity for businesses to reach new and existing customers and solicit two-way exchanges that are so valuable in terms of WOM marketing strategies (Charalabidis, et al. 2014; Chien-Wen, Wei-Cyuan, & Wen-Kuo, 2014; Soyoung, Martinez, McClure, & Soo Hyun, 2016). When service, education, and holiday social exchanges take place through social media posts, overall visibility of the participants' small businesses increased. The idea of brand loyalty also came across not only in terms of the visibility of services, but also in terms of learning through educational posts, and a sense of community with holiday posts.

Elements that hindered or slow an adoption process have been well documented in the literature (Franklin, 2014; Pechrová, Lohr, & Havlíček, 2015; Verheyden & Goeman, 2013). The challenges presented in each case aligned with those found in the literature, such as a lack of understanding, familiarity, and experiences using social media (Pechrová, et al., 2015). In this study, these challenges were also ones that these particular participants were able to overcome. However, as noted, not all small businesses have the resources to mitigate the social media marketing adoption challenges. Therefore, those who might lack computer literacy or other skills and resources necessary to adequately create and maintain a social media presence, might find these obstacles to be insurmountable to effective business practice. Despite challenges presented, given the

possibility for increased visibility and effective WOM marketing at a low cost, small businesses should attempt to incorporate some kind of resources to enable the adoption of social media marketing at least on some level.

Implications for Social Change

The specific business problem presented in this study was that some landscape industry small business owners lack strategies to adopt innovative social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. This research problem was sufficiently significant to be of interest to leaders who have the goal of positive social change, particularly given statistics that illustrate that small businesses have added roughly 8 million new jobs to the United States economy over the past 25 years, while by comparison big businesses have eliminated only roughly 4 million jobs during that same period (SBA, 2016).

Researchers suggest that entrepreneurship and small business activity contribute to the larger society in terms of creating financial, environment, and social wealth (Zahra & Wright, 2015). However, almost 50% of all small businesses close within 5 years in part due to poorly executed or inadequate marketing strategies (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Perry, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). So, as noted, while small businesses are providing job opportunities to the United States economy, their continued failure rate has prevented realizing the full benefits of social change. If small businesses can improve their long-term viability as the result of incorporating social media marketing strategies, then social change will come in the form of an improved local economy and improved quality of life factors. Additionally, increasing tax revenues due to viable small business

ventures could contribute to positive social change, through improvements in social institutions, such as public safety and schools.

Recommendations for Action

The research question presented in this study regarding how landscape industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability has been answered quite simply by ensuring the social media marketing tools used match the ones customers use, include relevant and frequent posts about services, education, and holidays to present a sense of community and increased customer brand loyalty as noted by Jing-Yu, Ming, Bing-Sheng, and Xing-Dong (2014) through the promotion of social relationships and pro-community behaviors.

Therefore, adoption of social media marketing strategies becomes a pivotal area that organizations such as the Small Business Administration (SBA), state, and community level small business programs should focus their training efforts toward. These training efforts could include local community classes on how to develop and effectively use social media sites to promote a small business, how to use social media on a smart device, as well as resources on how to find public computer availability at local colleges and libraries for those without in home computers. Literature could also be made available at public small business resource locations, such as the SBA, local libraries, labor boards, and community centers, listing the benefits and how potential ways to incorporate social media into their overall small business marketing strategies, along with a list of when trainings would be available.

Recommendations for Further Research

The research limitations for this study included potential location bias, company bias, industry bias, or bias against the researcher in some capacity, as well as limited transferability due to sample size and location. Future research could be expanded toward addressing the same research question but in a new industry. For example, a future research question could be: How do retail small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability? Addressing this research question through a new study, might provide interesting comparisons of the service industry, addressed in this study, to a retail industry. Likewise, another sector of the service industry could be explored. For example, how do hospitality industry small business owners successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability?

Likewise, other landscape companies in different locations could be explored to determine whether the findings of this study are particular to the landscape industry in locations. For example, the metropolitan area explored in this study included higher than average income and education levels, it might be interesting to see if poorer, more blue-collar, or more rural areas might experience the same benefits and challenges when using social media marketing.

The participants in this study were also limited to business owners with no more than 20 employees, who had experience using social media marketing. Future research could expand the study of social media marketing to larger companies both within and outside of the landscape industry. For example, an interesting research question might be

how do large corporate landscape industry businesses successfully use social media marketing strategies to ensure business viability? It might also be interesting to try to understand why landscape industry small businesses who have not adopted social media marketing, have made that decision.

In future studies, researchers could also expand the location to either a broader area of Alabama, a different state, region, or across the U.S. as a whole to see if results vary. It might be very interesting to see, for example, whether landscape industry small businesses in NY differ in their efficacious use of social media marketing, particularly if the post content subthemes of services, educational, and holiday would be similar. It also might be interesting to broaden the study to a larger US study on specific uses of social media marketing, using a quantitative approach.

Reflections

As I reflect on my experience with the DBA Doctoral Study process, I have learned not only about social media marketing as a whole, but I have also learned a lot about academic writing, data collection, and analysis. While I had already obtained a PhD prior to enrolling in the DBA program, the doctoral study was unique in that we were asked to explore a business problem, specifically, that had current applicability. My personal preconceived ideas related to writing a dissertation was that it would be an overwhelming experience. However, I was surprised that the second time is definitely easier, and the way Walden explained and reiterated the process of study alignment, particularly at the residencies, provided me such valuable insight that I will take with me in the next phase of my academic life.

As I reflect on the results of this study, I am surprised by how something that seems so simple to some, such as social media navigation, can have the potential to be such an insurmountable obstacle to others. As we move as a society toward a very heavy reliance toward the incorporation of technology, it becomes that much more important for small business owners to keep up on these changing aspects to stay relevant in the current marketplace. The question of where the responsibility lies is a balance of personal liability to keep up on changing technologies coupled with publically available resources to make that possible.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore how landscape industry small business owners have successfully used social media marketing strategies to help ensure business viability. Social media is a low-cost marketing tool used by many businesses; however, researchers have indicated that up to 54% of small businesses fail within the first 5 years of operation, with marketing often cited as a pivotal factor in small business success (Atanassova & Clark, 2015; Gray & Mabey, 2005; Hassan, Nadzim & Shirtuddin, 2015; Perry, 2014). Despite existing evidence, many small business owners continue to underutilize low-cost marketing options, like social media. (Castronova & Huang, 2012; Perry, 2014). In addition, the adoption of social media best practices in small business continues to be deficient (Shang, 2014).

Data analysis in this study revealed several key findings including, social media use as part of an overall marketing strategy, major types of social media used, social media content presented, as well as benefits and challenges of social media use. Previous

literature highlights one of the unique aspects of social media marketing as the adoption of a bidirectional communication exchange between business and consumer (Chang, et al. 2014; Csordas & Gati, 2014). Bidirectional communication channels, as well as eWOM, were noted as incredibly valuable tools to the landscape small businesses included in this study, allowing business owners to present their services, expertise, and answer customer questions. A lack of two-way activity noted by participants in the use of company websites, Twitter, and Instagram aligned with previous research that highlighted the importance of two-way communication.

The challenge to business owners is to determine the most effective two-way communication tools available, and regularly used, by both customer and business. In this study, Facebook was most effective social media marketing tool across all four cases. However, in future research, other social media tools might be more effective, depending on the customer base, location, and industry.

Previous researchers also noted that a lack of adoption was due to several factors including, a lack of understanding, familiarity, and experience with social media (Pechrová, et al., 2015). The challenges presented in each case in this study aligned with challenges presented in the literature but were also ones that these particular participants were able to overcome. As noted, not all small businesses ability to learn to mitigate these challenges. So, while an effective business practice might be to adopt social media marketing, the obstacles might be insurmountable to some who lack computer literacy or other resources to adequately create and maintain a social media presence.

While small businesses continue to provide the majority of job opportunities within the United States economy, their continued failure rate has hindered full benefits of social change that could develop with an improved local economy and enhanced quality of life factors, that could exist through increased tax revenues that could be realized in a situation where an increased number viable small business ventures persist. Therefore, the adoption of social media marketing strategies becomes a pivotal area that organizations such as the Small Business Administration (SBA), state, and local small business programs should focus training efforts.

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Appendix A: Data Collection and Interview Protocol

The data collection technique for this proposed study will include the use of an interview questionnaire and content analysis of the small businesses social media sites and other archival documents. Data will be collected using the following protocol:

1. The potential participants will first be contacted through social media sites or other electronic exchange. Given that this is a social media marketing study, it is important for the researcher to understand the level of online two-way engagement of the participant.
2. Arrangements will be made for the participant to answer the following structured questionnaire.

Interview Questions

1. *How do you typically use social media as part of your marketing strategy?*
2. *How does social media marketing fit into your overall marketing mix?*
3. *How do you know if certain social media marketing strategies that you use are more successful than others?*
4. *What were your greatest challenges to successfully implementing social media marketing strategies?*
5. *How did you address those challenges?*
6. *What are some of the greatest benefits of using social media marketing as part of your marketing strategy?*
7. *What additional information, that we have not already discussed, might be pertinent to this study on how you use social media marketing?*

3. I will use member checking to achieve saturation by providing a synthesis of the participant's responses to ensure the synthesis represents the participant's intended responses and any additional information is necessary. The member checking process will continue until no new information is obtained.
4. Data will be collected from social media sites following the interview questionnaire data-collection process.