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# Strategies to Improve Business Performance with Information from Social Media

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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2018

Abstract

Strategies to Improve Business Performance with Information from Social Media

by

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

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## Abstract

In the past 3 decades, China has experienced rapid economic growth. The China retail market reached renminbi (RMB) 29,651 billion in 2016, up by 10.4% from 2015. Using traditional ways that developed before the Internet era to acquire information regarding customers' changing preferences for products and services in a fast-moving business world is insufficient to support management in the retail industry to make informed strategic decisions. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with marketing information acquired from social media. The population comprised business leaders from 5 different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The conceptual framework for this study was built upon the diffusion of innovations theory. The data were collected through semistructured interviews, social media sites, and analyzed using Yin's 5-step data analysis process for case studies to identify themes. The findings revealed 3 emergent themes: knowledge strategies, persuasion and decision strategies, and implementation strategies. The findings from the study may contribute to positive social change when local employment opportunities can increase through increased employee spending in Southern China.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my family for their patience, motivation, and support of my educational goals. I wish that this accomplishment will inspire my children to overcome any challenges in their life in the future.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to extend thanks first to my God for the ability to take this journey. Secondly, I would like to extend thanks to my wife and children for their continuous encouragement and strong support. I would also like to extend my thanks to the guidance from my committee chair, Dr. Peter Anthony, and committee members Dr. Tim Malone. Without their support, I would not have finished well.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The China retailing market size reached RMB29,651 billion in 2016, up by 10.4% from 2015 (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China [MOFCOM], 2017). Retailers could use social media as a tool for developing and maintaining relationships with customers, enhancing brand relationship quality, and improving business performance (Agnihotri, Dingus, Hu, & Krush, 2016; Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016; Zhan, Sun, Wang, & Zhang, 2016). I developed a multiple case study to explore successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders in Southern China used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. I used the theory of diffusion of innovations as the conceptual framework for this study. The findings from the study may contribute to positive social change when local employment opportunities can increase through increased employee spending in Southern China.

### **Background of the Problem**

Sales organizations may yield positive results through increasing involvement in social media (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Customers are the most valuable asset of a firm (Tseng & Wu, 2014). As social media enables people to spread positive or negative word of mouth conveniently, consumers were more powerful than ever (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). Also with the advent of the Internet, customers have developed fast-changing tastes and preference; retailers must, therefore, design their offering with the customers' preferences in mind (Liu, Guillet, Xiao, & Law, 2014). Business leaders can use the marketing information acquired from social media to

explore consumers' preferences and assess changing business environments (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014). Ramanathan, Subramanian, and Parrott (2017) said that firms increasingly use social media as an information source. Firms should use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop specific strategies for different customer segments (Konus, Neslin, & Verhoef, 2014) (Konus et al., 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

A firm invests in enhancing customer relationships using social media technology rarely provides direct value to a firm unless business leaders use the marketing information acquired from social media to increase customer satisfaction (Trainor et al., 2014). More than 80% of global marketing and IT executives lack a clear strategy to implement a customer-centric innovation with the marketing information acquired from social media (Bear, 2015). The general business problem is that using traditional ways to acquire information regarding customers' changing preferences on products and services in a fast-moving business world is insufficient to support management in the retail industry in China to make informed strategic decisions (Sheng, Hartmann, Chen, & Chen, 2015). The specific business problem is that some business leaders lack customer-centric strategies to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The population comprised

business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The findings from the study may contribute to positive social change when local employment opportunities can increase through increased employee spending in Southern China.

### **Nature of the Study**

Researchers use the qualitative method to gain an understanding of personal lived experiences (Yin, 2014). As the intent of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of business leaders' strategy-making processes, I used the qualitative method for my research. Quantitative researchers use surveys to collect statistical data to closed-ended questions (Willig, 2013). Collecting statistical data does not fit the purpose of my study. Mixed methods research is a methodology that integrates quantitative and qualitative methods (Caruth, 2013). Since the quantitative method was not appropriate for this study, a combination of the qualitative and quantitative method was not appropriate.

Narrative researchers explore an individual's experiences from his or her storytelling and documents related to the participant's life (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The intent of narrative research focuses on stories based on individuals' life experience which does not fit the purpose of the study. Ethnography researchers observe, record, and interview participants in their specific cultural environment (Spencer, 2013).

Phenomenology is useful for understanding life experience through the views of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Ethnography and phenomenological designs were not appropriate as the focus of the study were not based on the life experience of the



participants nor their cultural environment. Case study researchers develop an in-depth understanding of multiple cases by reviewing multiple sources of evidence to identify and explore patterns and themes (Yin, 2014). I employed case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of business leaders' strategy-making processes.

### **Research Question**

What successful customer-centric strategies do business leaders in Southern China use to improve business performance using the information acquired from social media?

### **Interview Questions**

1. How does your company acquire information from social media to support customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement?
2. How have you selected the information acquired from social media to support customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement?
3. How does your company implement customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the information acquired from social media?
4. What are the major obstacles in implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the information acquired from social media?
5. How have you addressed the major obstacles when implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the information acquired from social media?

6. What are the strategies you adopted to maximize the benefit of implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the information acquired from social media?
7. What additional information would you like to share that may not have been addressed in the interview questions that relate to improving business performance using information from social media?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I designed the conceptual framework for this study using the diffusion of innovations theory. Everett Rogers originated the diffusion of innovations theory in 1962. The diffusion of innovations theory provides a five-stage framework that is applicable for mapping the innovation processes (Boaz, Baeza, & Fraser, 2016). Innovation diffusion theory's five-stage framework includes: (a) Awareness and learning in the knowledge stage, (b) establishing a like or dislike attitude toward an innovation ideas in the persuasion stage, (c) participating in activities to encourage or discourage innovation ideas in the decision stage, (d) putting innovation to use in the implementation stage, and (e) looking for correction decision at the confirmation stage (Coggio, 2015). When applied to this study, the diffusion of innovations theory could provide a lens for understanding the successful strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Business performance:* Business performance has two types of components which are financial and non-financial components (Ahmad & Zabri, 2016). Financial

performance indicators are measures of a company's financial health, including share price, cash flow, profit, growth, and return on investment (Simon et al., 2015).

Nonfinancial performance indicators include customer satisfaction, employee retention, teamwork, and safety (Simon et al., 2015).

*Customer-centric strategy:* A customer-centric strategy framework includes (a) enhancing customer engagement opportunities, (b) acquiring and understanding opinions from stakeholders, (c) comparing the firm's performance in line with customers' preferences, (d) developing collaborative approaches with internal and external partners to resolve customers' issues, and (e) measuring employee performance through customer-oriented behavior (Mukerjee, 2013). The better the customer-centric performance, the stronger the brand performance retailers achieve (Siahtiri, O'Cass, & Ngo, 2014).

*Innovation:* Innovation is an idea, practice, or object that an individual perceives as new (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Rapidly adopted innovations are having a relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability, and less complexity (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003).

*Marketing information:* Marketing information is the information that business leaders use to formulate or correct marketing decisions (Barakat, Shatnawi, & Ismail, 2016). Business leaders can use the marketing information acquired from social media to explore consumers' preferences and assess changing business environments (Trainor et al., 2014).

*Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs):* In China, the classification of SME depends on the industry category in terms of the number of employees, annual revenue,

and total assets comprising a company. In the retail industry, a medium-sized business has between 51 and 300 employees; and small business has less than 50 (National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China [NBS], 2017a).

*Social media:* Social media refers to the websites that enable people to engage with virtual communities through a computer or mobile device (Komodromos, 2014).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in research are the researchers' initial beliefs about the study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I have three assumptions in this study. The first assumption was that the findings from this study might contribute to business practice and positive social changes. The second assumption was that the responses gathered from participants truly reflect the participants' experiences because the participants can implement the knowledge produced by this study to enhance their competitiveness in doing business. The third assumption was that a qualitative multiple case study was an appropriate method to explore strategies used by business leaders to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media.

#### **Limitations**

Limitations are the uncontrollable factors that may affect the research results (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This study has two main limitations. First, the research population in this study only included business leaders of five different companies in the retail industry. The findings from this multiple case study cannot reach statistical

generalization because of the small population size. I, however, strived for reaching analytic generalization by comparing the results from case study to the previously developed theories. Second, Certain participants might find some processes of business decision making not appropriate for open disclosure. The Belmont Report is a historical document that provides the moral framework for understanding regulations in the United States on the use of humans in experimental research. The Belmont Report demands researchers to minimize the potential risk to participants (Hamel, Lantos, & Spertus, 2014). I adopted the protocols of the Belmont Report throughout the study with integrity, respect, and proper data documentation.

### **Delimitations**

Due to the labor-intensive and time-consuming nature of qualitative data collection and analysis, qualitative research tends to work with a relatively small number of participants (Willig, 2013). The research population included business leaders of five different companies in the retail industry with more than 3 years of experience in business performance enhancement based on marketing information acquired from the social media.

### **Significance of the Study**

#### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Social media and WEB 2.0 technologies enabled people to communicate with audiences on a mass scale. Customers become powerful and willing to voice their opinion (Malthouse et al., 2013). Retailers must design their offering with the customers' preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2014). Leaders of an organization can use the marketing

information acquired from social media to develop capabilities that enable them to serve their customers better (Trainor et al., 2014). Leaders of organizations could increase profitability by using social media to improve customer communication for the purpose of understanding what customers think (Ming & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Business practitioners could review and potentially use the findings of the study to improve business performance by using the marketing information acquired from social media. Business leaders in Southern China could implement knowledge produced by this study to develop capabilities to enable their organizations in serving their customers better and improving the competitiveness and survival rate of these companies.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change through increased local employment opportunities following increased employee spending in Southern China. In addition to the rapid growth of the China retailing market, online retail sales in China reached RMB 5,155 billion in 2016, up by 7.1% from 2015 (MOFCOM, 2017). Furthermore, cross-border ecommerce was the fastest growing market in the world, according to the Ecommerce Foundation (2015), which projected the market size of cross-border ecommerce could triple by 2020. Firms in Southern China have the potential to enhance local economy with increased business opportunities in China and cross-border ecommerce markets if the business leaders implement the knowledge gained by this study. The employment opportunities could increase through increasing employees' spending in Southern China.

## A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. The conceptual framework for this study was the diffusion of innovations theory. The European Commission (2014) suggested that six themes when studying innovation in the retail industry are: (a) reducing effort for customers, (b) consumers as innovation drivers, (c) business model innovation, (d) brand as innovation drivers, (e) education, training, and skills, and (f) emerging technology systems. In this section, I reviewed the literature to explore the ability of the successful business leaders in the retail industry to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. Furthermore, I attempted to outline the status of China's retail industry with census data and government reports. The outline of this literature review is in Figure 1.

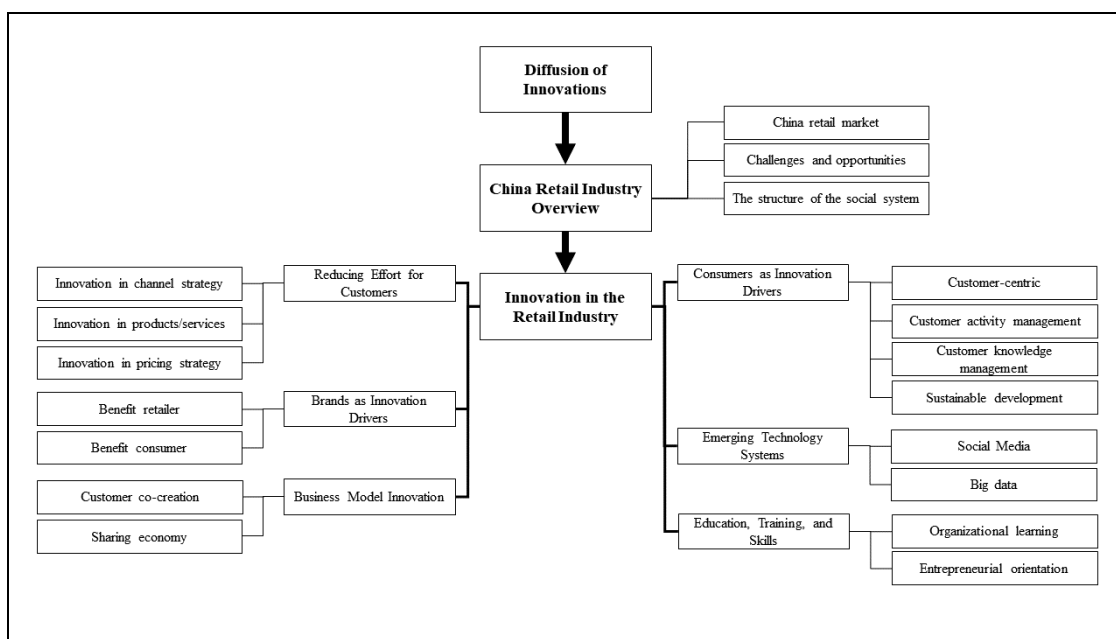


Figure 1. Literature review map.

Research for this study included scholarly articles from peer-reviewed journals and searches in various databases, such as ABI/INFORM Collection, Business Source Complete, Emerald Insight, ProQuest Central, and SAGE Journals. The key search words included: *social media, retail, customer-centric, innovation, channel strategy, pricing strategy, customer knowledge management, sustainability, business model, customer co-creation, sharing economy, change management, brand, entrepreneurial orientation, SME, organizational learning, and big data*. The literature review contained 112 peer-reviewed resources published within 5 years of the study. In this doctoral study, the total number of references was 167, of which 143 (85.6%) were peer-reviewed and published within 5 years of expected completion of the study.

### **Diffusion of Innovations**

Innovation diffusion theory provides a 5-stage framework that includes (a) the knowledge stage, (b) the persuasion stage, (c) the decision stage, (d) the implementation stage, and (e) the confirmation stage (Coggio, 2015). In the knowledge stage, an innovator gains an understanding of innovation experiences (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). The understanding that an innovator gains in the knowledge stage may motivate the innovator to acquire further knowledge to formulate their innovative ideas (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). In the knowledge stage, retailers could use social media technology with customer-centric approaches to improve their understanding of the preferences of consumers and the fast-changing business environment. In the persuasion stage, a retailer establishes a like or dislike attitude toward innovation ideas that generated in the



knowledge stage. In the decision stage, a retailer participates in activities to encourage or discourage innovation ideas and puts innovation to use in the implementation stage.

Finally, the decision makers may reverse an innovation if the outcome of the implementation stage does not fulfill managements' expectation or the decision makers have found an alternative in the implementation stage. The diffusion of innovations theory could provide a lens for understanding the successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in the retail industry in Southern China.

### **China Retail Industry Overview**

Since the Chinese economic reform started in 1978, China has gone through rapid economic growth (Zhang, Jin, Wang, Goh, & He, 2016). The China retailing market size reached RMB 29,651 billion in 2016, up by 10.4% from 2015 (MOFCOM, 2017). According to the NBS (2017b), a total of 91,258 retail companies were providing services in China, and 95% of retail companies have less than 100 employees.

Although the total market size is enormous, retailers might face different types of challenges and opportunities in different business sectors. First, the overall Chinese internet retailing market has gradually stepped into a relatively mature and stable growth stage from previous rapid growth since 2015 (Deloitte, 2016). The China internet retailing sector recorded RMB 3,880 billion in 2015, up by 33.3% from 2014 (China Internet Network Information Center [CNNIC], 2016). The top five internet retailing categories in China were apparel and footwear, daily necessities, books and audio-visual products, computer and communication products, and household electric appliances.

Deloitte suggested that rural ecommerce and cross-border ecommerce are the new growth points. Urban and rural retail businesses might have a different consumers' preferences, business model, and logistics operation. Retailers should innovate new business models to deal with the changing business environment. Second, the Ecommerce Foundation (2015) ranked China as one of the top three countries in cross-border ecommerce. The Ecommerce Foundation ranked the top three countries are USA, UK, and China. In China, cross-border ecommerce recorded RMB 3,748 billion in 2014 (MOFCOM, 2015). The Ecommerce Foundation (2015) projected the global market size of cross-border ecommerce would triple in the next 5 years. Although Chinese retailers have an opportunity to grow with the market, Deloitte (2016) declared that the major challenges that Chinese cross-border import enterprises faced were the changing import policy of China government, lacking experience in cross-border supply chain management, and operation models' innovation. The challenges for retailers in China in different market sectors came from the changing business environment from offline to online, urban to rural, and domestic to cross-border with changing government policies, technologies, and supply chains. Business leaders might use the marketing information acquired from social media to support their customer-centric innovation decisions to deal with the fast-changing and challenging business environment in China.

The organizational structure and culture could be an aid or an obstacle to the diffusion process of innovation of a company (Desmarchelier & Fang, 2016; Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Comparing with the employees under Western culture, Chinese employees more tend to follow instructions from their employers and strive to maintain

good relationships with their peers (Huang, 2016; Li & Sun, 2015). Communicated through the employers and gain support from key stakeholders on the innovation ideas could be critical to the success of innovation diffusion in China.

Business leaders in the retail industry can use marketing information acquired from social media to explore consumers' changing preferences on products and services and competitors' changing behavior (Trainor et al., 2014). Business leaders in the retail industry could use the diffusion of innovation theory as a framework to explore and map key dimensions of implementation of the innovation ideas (Boaz et al., 2016). Using the diffusion of innovation framework with the marketing information acquired from social media, business leaders could develop an innovation plan and ask for support from their key stakeholders. An innovation plan with key stakeholders' buy-in might also include subordinates' buy-in as Chinese subordinates obey their superiors and strive to maintain a balance with peers.

### **Reducing Effort for Customers**

The main aim of innovation in retail is to improve customers' shopping experience (European Commission, 2014). Customers' shopping experience positively affects customer satisfaction and repeat purchase intention (Pappas, Pateli, Giannakos, & Chrissikopoulos, 2014). Successful Retailers adopts customer-centric strategies to create core competencies by improving targeted customers' quality of life. Business leaders who adopt an appropriate strategy could enhance their customers' loyalty. Eventually, the core competencies become the organization's competitive advantage, and hence improve the firm's profitability.

Business leaders can use the marketing information acquired from social media to explore consumers' preferences on products and services (Trainor et al., 2014). Business leaders can apply the marketing information acquired from social media to improve customers' perceived quality of life. According to the diffusion of innovation theory, reducing complexity, enhancing relative advantage, and increasing trialability are the factors that positively affect the innovation's diffusion (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Innovations that enhance customers' quality of life could improve the success rate of innovation diffusion.

**Innovation in sales channel strategy.** The factors influence customer responses to a vendor's sales channel selection strategy including past customer behavior and channel usage (Konus et al., 2014). Liu, Li, Peng, Lv, & Zhang (2013) investigated the customer behavior from 3 million transaction records in a Chinese e-commerce website and found that online consumers are more price-sensitive and would communicate more when compared to purchasers in the traditional type of business. Jang, Chang, and Chen (2013) indicated that the members of a retailer's social network are more likely to purchase at the physical stores of the retailer. Jang et al. suggested retailers communicate and provide services to customers through both offline and online channels. The retailers who use limited communication channels may not fully engage with all potential customers (Rezaei & Ismail, 2014). Extending to new channels offers new opportunities and challenges to the retailers, including reengineering processes to handle the increasing complexity of operations, enhancing staff training to handle the new type of business channels, and developing new pricing strategies to handle customers from online and

offline channels.

Retailers should have channel specific pricing strategies (Kozlenkova, Hult, Lund, Mena, & Kekec, 2015). With the offline channels, consumers' purchases were based on experiences; with online channels, the customers' perceived product knowledge influenced purchase intentions (Zeng, Dasgupta, & Weinberg, 2016). With the online channels, external price claims may negatively affect consumers' purchase intentions, especially while the brand is new (Kukar-Kinney & Carlson, 2015). Online and offline consumers have different purchasing behavior. Retailers could adopt appropriate channel specific pricing and service strategies to customers through different channels.

**Innovation in products and services.** Involving potential customers in the testing of concepts and prototypes as early as possible is essential to the success of customer-centric products and services development (Chamberlain, Esquivel, Miller, & Patmore, 2015). Mukerjee (2013) proposed a customer-centric framework: (a) Enhancing customer engagement opportunities, (b) acquiring and understanding opinions from stakeholders, (c) comparing the firm's performance in line with customers' preferences, (d) developing collaborative approaches with internal and external partners to resolve customers' issues, and (e) measuring employee performance through customer-oriented behavior. Alam (2014) introduced a four-phase service development framework including (a) Acquiring the customer opinions via social media in the initiation phase, (b) communicating innovative ideas with customers during the comprehension phase, (c) acquiring customer feedback from trial processes during the service development phase, and (d) promoting the service in customers' social network during the execution phase.

Business leaders could observe consumers' changing preferences on products and services and competitors' changing behaviors from the marketing information acquired from social media to support the customer-centric innovation strategy.

**Innovation in pricing.** Hinterhuber and Liozu (2014) identified innovation in pricing strategies including needs-based market segmentation, pay-for-performance pricing, new metrics, and participative pricing. Hinterhuber and Liozu also identified innovation in pricing tactics including revenue management, contingent pricing, bundling, individualized pricing, flat fees, and psychological pricing. A company could enhance competitive advantages and increase customer satisfaction through innovation in pricing (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2014). Companies will increase profits and customer satisfaction with innovative pricing if they adopt pricing strategies and tactics properly (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2014). However, not all pricing strategies are adaptable for all companies. Company leaders should consider the pricing strategies that appropriate for their company. The following examples indicate how some companies might have difficulty in adopting value-based pricing and pay-what-you-want pricing strategies.

Retailers use value-based pricing strategies to sell unique products at a profitable price (Liozu & Hinterhuber, 2013). Value-based pricing is the most desirable pricing approach (Dost & Geiger, 2017). Liozu and Hinterhuber (2013) said that retailers used value-based pricing strategies to increase customers' willingness to pay (WTP) and improve the firms' performance through the process of communicating customer value, understanding customers' expectations, and aligning prices with customers' value perceptions (Liozu & Hinterhuber, 2013). However, each consumer has different degrees

of WTP for the same product. Some companies might be able to acquire WTP information from customer-created content on social media.

Pay what you want (PWYW) is a new pricing strategy that allows customers to set the price according to the customers' own will (Zeng et al., 2016). Customers pay a right price for the products or services depending on customer satisfaction (Kunter, 2015). Restaurants, hotels, and museums who have well-established brand might be appropriate for adopting the PWYW pricing approach (Schons et al., 2014). PWYW pricing might not be appropriate for start-up companies who need time to establish brand awareness.

### **Consumers as Innovation Drivers**

Consumers play the most important role in driving innovations in the retail sector (European Commission, 2014). As social media enables people to communicate with large audiences, consumers become powerful and willing to voice their opinion (Malthouse et al., 2013). Consumers have the freedom to source information, strong power in comparing prices and can switch service providers. Retailers and services providers should consider customers' satisfaction and their overall purchasing experience (Oliveira & Toaldo, 2015). Retailers should design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2013). The theory of diffusion of innovation suggested that an innovation process often begins with the recognition of a problem (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Typically, heavy users encounter problems, think of solutions, and then convince others to support their innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Social media could be one of many convenience platforms that the heavy users used to convince others to express the problem and ask for support. The challenge retailers face understanding

how heavy users perceive their products (Oliveira & Toaldo, 2015). Using social media technology with customer-centric approaches might help retailers to improve the understanding of the preferences of heavy users and the fast-changing business environment.

**Customer-centric.** Retailers will find their new competitive edge from a customer-centric viewpoint (Heinonen, 2014). The better customer-centric performance; the stronger brand performance retailers achieve (Siahtiri et al., 2014). Heinonen (2014) suggested viewing customer relationship from a customer-centric viewpoint. From a customer-centric viewpoint, a business leader might view customer service differently.

**Customer activity management.** Mickelsson (2013) suggested using a customer-centric point to view of customer activities at three levels: (a) core customer activities are the activities that interact with the provider's service element, (b) related activities are activities that the customer interacts with other providers, and (c) other activities are those that indirectly affect the customer experience creation (Mickelsson, 2013). Mickelsson (2013) declared that the related activities are invisible and uncontrollable by the primary service providers. However, the uncontrollable elements are the key factors that affect the customers' behavior (Heinonen, 2014). A customer-centric retailer should view each customer's activities on all three levels to provide customer-centric services to customers.

**Customer knowledge management (CKM).** Knowledge management (KM) capabilities are critical to enable the organization in using the information gathered from the organization's customer relationship management initiatives (Zhang et al., 2015).



Boateng (2014) declared firms could make a correct and timely decision with the support from CKM. Boateng suggested using social media to enable users to acquire information, share information, and interact with a virtual platform. For example, Starbucks used social media to support their customer knowledge management in the offline business (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Starbucks uses Facebook, through which the company gains understanding of its customers' behaviors and preferences (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Starbucks also invited customers to create content and evaluate ideas in their corporate discussion forum (Chua & Banerjee, 2013). Social media could support CKM efforts effectively and efficiently for offline businesses as well as online businesses. Furthermore, Retailers should use the CKM to manage the tacit knowledge as well as the explicit knowledge acquired from customer engagement.

Tacit and explicit knowledge are the key components of knowledge (Chuang, Jackson, & Jiang, 2016). Explicit knowledge is the knowledge that people can directly convert into sentences or mathematical equations (Chuang et al., 2016). Tacit knowledge is part of an individual's experiences that is subjective, hard to express in words (Schoenherr, Griffith, & Chandra, 2014). Almost all knowledge has tacit components (Chuang et al., 2016). An individual acquires tacit knowledge through observation and imitation (Chuang et al., 2016). A retailer may establish a competitive advantage through acquiring explicit and tacit knowledge in customer engagement (Schoenherr et al., 2014). Salespersons are a primary source of knowledge for their organizations because a salesperson can integrate themselves both within external networks and internal networks (Arnett & Wittmann, 2014). Social media is a useful tool to support the sharing of tacit

knowledge (Panahi, Watson, & Partridge, 2016). A retailer could acquire customers' information from the social media via customers' post content or when engaged with a salesperson on the retailers' or competitors' website. Retailers could use IT tools, such as content analysis software, to manage and share the tacit and explicit customer knowledge within the organization for business performance improvement.

**Sustainable development.** Climate change has an extreme impact on the future of humankind (United Nations, 2015). In 2011, humankind had made an all-time high record of releasing carbon to the atmosphere (Boden, Marland, & Andres, 2015). Sustainability efforts affect consumers' purchasing experiences, and revisiting intention (Chen, 2015). A customer-centric firm should place importance on supporting sustainable development.

A sustainable development project may not directly enhance a firm's financial performance in the short term (Williams, 2014). An investigation from Amisano (2017) indicated that no significant correlation between environmental responsibility and financial sustainability. Although sustainability did not offer reward from the cost saving, some high sustainability firms received an adequate return on sustainable investment in another way and outperformed the low-sustainability firms (Eccles, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014; Lourenço, Callen, Branco, & Curto, 2014). A study from Lourenço et al. (2014) indicated that companies that have a higher reputation for sustainability development have a higher net income. Organizations receive rewards on sustainable investment from the better communication with stakeholders, better support from the employee, and stronger reputation in the market (Eccles et al., 2014; Lourenço et al., 2014). Green firms

maintain a strong corporate presence while introducing corporate social responsibility activities on the key social media platforms (Reilly & Hynan, 2014). The key success factors for employing strategic sustainability views in a product innovation are (a) considering the sustainability factors in the early stage of innovation, and (b) considering the sustainability factors throughout the product lifecycle and value chain (Hallstedt, Thompson, & Lindahl, 2013). Hence, the organization achieved a stronger corporate presence and stronger reputation in the market. Using social media to communicate the innovative ideas and activities on sustainable development could enhance the return on sustainable investment for an organization.

### **Business Model Innovation**

The business model is as an important driver for innovation that defines how a firm conduct business (Bocken, de Pauw, Bakker, & van der Grinten, 2016). The key elements of a business model include offering value to customers, managing company's resources, re-engineering the processes, and generating profit (Christensen, Bartman, & Van Bever, 2016). Business model innovation is a powerful way to improve organizations' productivity, and drive growth in sales revenue and return on sales (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015). Creating new businesses with the new business model is full of challenges, but critical to the company's success over the long term (Christensen et al., 2016). A business leader might achieve a different business outcome from the same products through a different business model (Bocken et al., 2016). Business model innovation is a powerful way to improve organizations' productivity, and drive growth in sales revenue and return on sales (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015). Business leaders in the

China retailing market could achieve cost-cutting, improve efficiency, and overcome the organizational decline through business model innovation. Business leaders could use successful business model innovation strategies to achieve a successful business result such as customer co-creation and sharing economy.

**Customer co-creation.** Retailers could use customer co-creation strategy to create new products or services with a blend of ideas from direct customers (Khanagha, Volberda, & Oshri, 2017). Khanagha et al. (2017) declared that customer co-creation strategy is a source of innovativeness and competitive advantage of an organization. Heidenreich and Handrich (2015) conducted empirical research to investigate the willingness of customers to engage in customer co-creation. The study results indicated that a customer's willingness on participating in co-creation showed more explanatory and predictive power of intention to adopt innovative technology-based services (Heidenreich & Handrich, 2015). Martini, Massa, and Testa (2014) introduced a successful customer co-creation project at a well-known, large-scale food manufacturer in Italy. The company received 4,000 ideas in an organized online Southern China and implemented the ideas based on internet votes received (Martini et al., 2014). A firm might use social media to communicate with customers to identify the ideas that are most welcome by customers. Furthermore, although customer co-creation might not generate value for every consumer, sustainable value co-creation might generate benefit for each stakeholder. Organizations could improve the sustainability progress by communicating with stakeholders to achieve co-creation, knowledge sharing and gain collaborative power for improving the sustainability progress (Scandeliuss & Cohen, 2016).

Sustainable value co-creation leads to a value enhancement for users (Lacoste, 2016). Customers enjoy the benefit of the sustainable value co-creation to achieve the targeted sustainable performance via cost reduction or increased efficiency (Lacoste, 2016). Organizations might enjoy the benefit of a sustainable value co-creation program from enhancing corporate image and identity, and through the program to stimulate interest and acquire innovative ideas for innovations (Scandeliuss & Cohen, 2016). For example, Product-Service System (PPS) provides an opportunity for sustainable value co-creation as the concept integrates products, services, and stakeholders to create a solution sustainably (Arnold, 2017; Reim, Parida, & Örtqvist, 2015). Customer co-creation is a business model that provides benefit for organizations and some consumers; sustainable value co-creation is a business model that leads to value enhancement on the triple bottom lines, which is financial, social, and environmental. Therefore, an organization using the sustainable value co-creation strategy could earn support from stakeholders and the society.

**Sharing economy.** Sharing economy is a new business model that enables consumers to share or obtain products or services on online platforms (Hamari, Sjöklint, & Ukkonen, 2015). A survey conducted by Hamari et al. (2015) indicated that the participants perceived the sharing economy positively with good comments. Kathan, Matzler, and Veider (2016) identified four reasons for the popularization of the sharing economy are (a) establishing trust via online payment systems, and the user comment on the social media, (b) owning and sharing a product has similar benefits, (c) increasing environmental sustainability, and (d) convenient location with lower cost. Services

providers should put effort to balancing conflict, shedding risk, and supporting customer to create more value (Malhotra & Van Alstyne, 2014). Sharing economy is rapidly growing in China (State Information Center [SIC], 2017). China's sharing economy market size reached RMB3,452 billion in 2016, up by 103% from 2015 (SIC, 2017). The growth of sharing economy in China might change the competitive environment in the retail industry in China. The retailer in China should well prepare themselves to deal with the fast-changing business environment.

**Change management.** Managing organizational change is not easy especially for large organizations (Worley & Mohrman, 2014). Some change management theories, such as Kotter's eight-step change model, GE's change acceleration process, Prosci's ADKAR model are widely guided organizational change management today (Pollack and Pollack, 2014; Tobias, 2015; Worley & Mohrman, 2014). Tobias (2015) claimed that regardless of the increase of studies and theories on change management in decades, about 70% of all change initiatives fail. However, Cândido and Santos (2015) did not accept the 70% failure rate and claimed that the actual failure rate is hard to determine. For example, Esbenschade, Vidal, Fascilla, & Ono (2016) contributed a case study on an organization change project in a welfare agency. The project met or exceeded initial goals on cost-cutting, and improving efficiency (Esbenschade et al., 2016). However, Esbenschade et al. (2016) indicated that the project increased the workforce stress, and deteriorated the client relationship. Internal customers are an important stakeholder group (Grace & Lo Iacono, 2015). Especially, the frontline employees' behavior may influence other stakeholder groups, including external customers, external business partners, and

internal operation units (Plouffe, Bolander, Cote, & Hochstein, 2016). The satisfaction of internal and external customers should have higher priority over the factors of quantitative efficiency (Esbenshade et al., 2016). Managing business model change is not easy, it is full of risk, and the failure rate is high. A customer-centric organization could use social media to acquire customer preferences and expectations to establish a vision of the change, communicate the vision with the stakeholders, and gain support from the internal and external customer to reduce obstacles to organization change.

### **Brands as Innovation Drivers**

Building a healthy brand enhance the advertising effect on customer equity and influence the customers' purchase behavior (Mirzaei, Baumann, Johnson, & Gray, 2016). Building a strong brand is essential to differentiating brands from their competitors and ensuring competitive advantage (Moreira, Fortes, & Santiago, 2017). A brand is a promise to its customers of relevant and differentiated benefits (European Commission, 2014). Therefore, keeping promises to customers is the first step in generating and maintaining valuable customers for the brand (Davidow, 2015). The brand relationship quality would influence customers' behavioral outcome (Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015). The perceived benefits from the association with a brand can boost customers' satisfaction, generate positive word-of-mouth advertising, and build brand loyalty through the brand (Lee, Yen, & Hsiao, 2014). For small businesses, brand orientation strategy is one of the key foundations in achieving a high degree of customer-centric performance outcomes effectively (Osakwe, 2016). Consumers are willing to pay a higher price for a luxury brand with higher brand equity (Kim, Natter, & Spann, 2014;

Siu et al., 2016). Both small retailers and luxury goods retailers could improve business performance by building a strong brand. Building a strong brand not only benefits retailers, but also the consumers.

A well-recognized brand brings perceived benefit to the consumer, such as better product or service quality, better pricing, and attractive special offers (Liao, Wang, & Yeh, 2014). Consumers reduce perceived risk with a familiar brand (Nepomuceno, Laroche, & Richard, 2014). The perceived quality of a brand can improve consumers' evaluations (Allameh, Khazaei Pool, Jaber, Salehzadeh, & Asadi, 2015) and generate repeat purchases (Jani & Han, 2014). Strong brand relationship quality enhances consumer judgments regarding brand extensions (Kim, Park, & Kim, 2014). A retailer should place importance on creating benefits to consumers by enhancing brand quality. The five core drivers of brand consumption are (a) functional brand consumption, (b) emotional brand consumption, (c) self-oriented brand consumption, (d) social brand consumption, and (e) relational brand consumption (Davis, Piven, & Breazeale, 2014). A business leader should innovate their operation and branding strategy on all five consumptions to establish a strong brand.

Social media has a significant influence on customers' behavior, including emotions and attachments to brands (Hudson et al., 2015). Retailers could build customer loyalty while they interact between service operations, promotion, and social media reviews (Ramanathan et al., 2017). Some firms enhance brand relationship quality (BRQ) by interacting with customers on social media (Hudson et al., 2016). Consumers who engage with brands on social media have a greater emotional attachment to the brands



and generate better word of mouth of the brands (Hudson et al., 2015). Social media may be the only effective way to satisfy consumers' preference on two-way interactions with brands (Davis et al., 2014). Many firms used social media to engage customers with their brands (Okazaki, Díaz-Martín, Rozano, & Menéndez-Benito, 2015). However, social media can either strengthen or kill a brand because social media could alter the customers' brand preferences and behavior (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015). The competition rules and strategic behavior of the online setting are more comprehensive than that of the offline setting (Nguyen, Yu, Melewar, & Chen, 2015). In the traditional setting, consumers evaluate store brands purchase intention with various factors including merchandise, services, price, and stores' layout (Kazemi, 2014). Purchase intention is a significant predictor of consumers' subsequent purchase behavior (Wang, Wu, Lin, & Chen, 2017). Social media strategic capability positively affects brand innovation (Nguyen et al., 2015). Kohli et al. (2015) suggested that the key to successful branding depends on how quickly companies can adopt new strategies in response to consumers' preferences. Firms could make a correct and timely brand innovation decision with the information acquired from the customers via the social media.

### **Education, Training, and Skills**

European Commission (2014) argued that new retail concepts change business and technological process lead to the adoption of new knowledge and skills in retail companies. The learning capability is the most effective dynamic capabilities to improve companies' performance (Lin & Wu, 2014). The ability to learn is vital to the success of an organization (Taboli & Rezaeian, 2016). Learning processes could help the key

stakeholders release from the uncertainty of innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). The joint effects of globalization, rapid technological changes, and deregulation contributed to the relentless rise of new customer needs and business models and thereby to the growing volatility of the business environment (Favato & Vecchiato, 2016). Chamberlain et al. (2015) developed a case study to explore how British Telecommunications plc (BT) transformed to a customer-centric company between 2005 and 2010. Chamberlain et al. identified that training is critical to the success of the transformation. Chamberlain et al. stated that training provides alertness of competence mismatching, a study of the business case in the employment of the design procedure. As customers' preference and taste are changing fast and the technologies are changing fast, education and training are critical to organizational survive in the retail industry. Business leaders in the retail industry should offer periodical and sufficient training to their staffs to deal with the changes.

In the retail industry, entrepreneurial orientation could enhance the organizational learning capabilities and increase the market shares (Altinay, Madanoglu, De Vita, Arasli, & Ekinci, 2015). Alegre and Chiva (2013) investigated 182 SMEs firms in Italy and Spain. The investigation results from Alegre and Chiva indicated that entrepreneurial orientation enhances organization learning capability and innovation performance because the strategic orientation from entrepreneurs steers the direction of businesses by introducing new offering to outperform competitors. However, Altinay et al. (2015) argued that an entrepreneurial approach is a short-term solution that the benefit cannot last for long. Entrepreneurial orientation might have little direct effect on innovation performance unless the organization facilitated the entrepreneurial orientation with

organizational learning (Alegre & Chiva, 2013). According to the data from the NBS (2017b) the average company size of the 95% retail companies are less than 100 employees. Small-sized enterprises might feel convenience to use entrepreneurial orientation to steer the direction of businesses. However, systematic organizational learning might be necessary while the training objectives are to learn the new knowledge and skills, such as using social media in customer engagement, and customer-centric transformation.

Organizational learning means learning activities in an organization (Taboli & Rezaeian, 2016) with the objectives to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the organizations' operations through practices and reviews (Lin & Wu, 2014). Davidow (2015) suggested that every employee should spend a week every quarter in the complaint-handling department answering phones and other customer communications to increase the accountability of each employee (and manager) to the customer and their needs. In a keen competition business world, managers should be able to sense, seize, and manage resources to deal with the changes (Favato & Vecchiato, 2016; Lin & Wu, 2014). Employee education leads to a better understanding of the emotional toll a bad customer experience can cause the customer and can sometimes lead to epiphanies regarding possible solutions for the organization to prevent future problems, or for the customer to know how to handle the problem in the future if it occurs (Davidow, 2015). Increasingly, companies analyze the customers' opinions from social media to understand customers' preferences and customers comment about competitors' offering (He, Wu, Yan, Akula, & Shen, 2015). A retail company could develop teaching materials for the organizational

learning from the result of scenario analysis on the marketing information acquired from social media. A company could boost growth with the changing market if the company used the marketing information from social media to develop material for organizational learning.

Using social media in organizational learning presents new challenges and opportunities to an organization (Zhang et al., 2015). Using social media for teaching and learning is a hot research topic (Rodríguez-Hoyos, Haya Salmón, & Fernández-Díaz, 2015). Because of the positive affordances of using social media for education (Manca & Ranieri, 2016b; Rutten, Ros, Kuijpers, & Kreijns, 2016), using social media in organizational learning is a growing trend (Ngai, Moon, Lam, Chin, & Tao, 2015). Scholars have frequently explored the pedagogical role of social media in the aspects of communication, collaboration, learning, and instruction in educational institutions (Ngai et al., 2015). A study from Manca and Ranieri (2016a) indicated that social media is appropriate to support the collaborative learning activity. Educators could use Twitter and LinkedIn to promote Southern China building and support communications among educators and learners (Manca & Ranieri, 2016a). Deloitte (2016) declared that the rural e-commerce is a new growth point of retail business in China. Retailers in China could use social media in organizational learning to overcome the challenges of learning need from a decentralized operation.

### **Emerging Technology Systems**

In the retail industry, emerging technology systems refer to the system that can enhance retailers' interaction with customers, and support retail innovation (European

Commission, 2014). More than 75% of 437 Gartner Research Circle Members companies invested or are going to invest in big data (Gartner, 2015). Some large retailers use big data to support their business decision and enhanced customer services. For example, Amazon, eBay, and Alibaba use personalized recommendations system to provide better service to their clients (Yang, & Gao, 2017). Tesco uses the big data technology to analyze the behavior of their 17 million customers (Donnelly, Simmons, Armstrong, & Fearn, 2015). However, many companies, even though they have already invested in big data, are not confident on the return for their investment (Gartner, 2015). In China, only 21% of retailers have invested on big data (IBM Institute for Business Value, 2015). Major challenges for SMEs to use big data include capital burden, lack of expertise to interpret the data, and managerial models (Coleman et al., 2016; Donnelly et al., 2015). Retailers should consider the cost-effectiveness in adopting big data for frontline management (Lam, Sleep, Hennig-Thurau, Sridhar, & Saboo, 2017). In Hong Kong, half of the small and medium enterprise retailers did not know about big data (Hong Kong Productivity Council, 2016). Some online and cloud-based big data solutions, such as Google Analytics, Big data on Amazon web services, and IBM's Watson Analytics might be easier to use and more affordable compared to the big data systems at some large retailers. SME retailers should place importance on the new developments of some inexpensive online and cloud-based big data solutions to enhance their competitiveness.

Corporations could use social media as a tool for developing and maintaining a relationship with customers (Zhan et al., 2016), enhancing brand relationship quality (Hudson et al., 2016), and improving business performance (Agnihotri et al., 2016). Sales

organizations might yield positive results through increasing involvement on social media, as customers appreciate a timely response from salespersons (Agnihotri et al., 2016). An investigative result from Jang et al. (2013) indicated a relationship between consumers' intention to use online information search and intention to purchase at online and physical stores. SME retailers might be able to get brand awareness on social media, for a small cost, as consumers can spread the word-of-mouth to larger groups of potential customers on social media (Kohli et al., 2015). An organization could enhance their absorptive capacity through dialogues on social media (Schlagwein & Hu, 2016). Frontline employees can gather unique and context-specific data on customer needs and problems in service delivery, and customer sentiment and preferences to improve service quality (Lam et al., 2017). Retailers should encourage and enable employees to engage in higher levels of social media activities, such as selecting and analyzing online content for creating new knowledge, summarizing, and synthesizing the marketing information from social media because engaging in higher levels of social media activities related to higher levels of employee creativity performance (Sigala & Chalkiti, 2015). SME retailers could acquire information on the customers' changing preferences on products and services through the communication with customers on social media. The marketing information acquired from social media could support the retailers' innovation strategy to improve their business performance.

### **Application of Conceptual Framework**

Leaders of organizations could use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop specific strategies for different customer segments (Konus et al.,

2014), and also develop capabilities that enable the firm to serve their customers better (Trainor et al., 2014). However, more than 80% of global marketing and IT executives lack a clear strategy to implement customer-centric innovations with the marketing information acquired from social media (Bear, 2015). Innovation diffusion is a central topic in strategic management (Nelson, Earle, Howard-Grenville, Haack, & Young, 2014). For example, Kurnia, Choudrie, Mahbubur, and Alzougool (2015) investigated 125 Malaysian retail SMEs to examine the factors that affect the innovation on e-commerce technology adoption. Boaz et al. (2016) conducted 95 interviews in England and Sweden to investigate how the diffusion of innovations model is applicable for mapping the critical innovation factors with services processes. Although the diffusion of innovations theory is useful for explaining technology transfer (Coggio, 2015), measuring innovation is full of challenges (Nelson et al., 2014). Nelson et al. reviewed 5,592 articles about innovation from academic journals. The study results indicated high error rates on the measurement approaches. Researchers should strive for improving the accuracy of measurement and place importance on investigating the disagreement between different measures of the same innovation phenomenon (Nelson et al., 2014). Using different sources of information to triangulate a research finding of the same innovation phenomenon will help both to confirm and to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Using multiple cases design offers an increased likelihood of study replication and more persuasive findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this multiple case study, I triangulated multiple sources of evidence and provide my analysis of the participants' responses for member checking to ensure the credibility of

my study. Innovation diffusion theory provides a 5-stage framework that includes (a) the knowledge stage, (b) the persuasion stage, (c) the decision stage, (d) the implementation stage, and (e) the confirmation stage (Coggio, 2015). I used the diffusion of innovations theory as a lens for understanding the successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China.

**Knowledge stage.** An innovator gain understanding of innovation experiences in the knowledge stage (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). The information that acquired in the knowledge stage may motivate innovators to acquire further knowledge to formulate their innovative ideas (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Bayarçelik, Taşel, and Apak (2014) interviewed SMEs business leaders in Turkey. The investigated result indicated that the most important innovation criteria is management skill. The other important criteria include technological capability, financial factor, and firm size (Bayarçelik et al., 2014). The participants gave almost half of the total score on these top four criteria (Bayarçelik et al., 2014). The participants ranked consumer preference and culture factor as less important in Turkey's SMEs. However, Storey, Cankurtaran, Papastathopoulou, and Hultink (2015) argued that the factors that affect service innovation are different from product innovation. Storey et al. (2015) contributed a meta-analysis on 92 samples from 114 articles to identify the success factors for service innovation. Service innovation processes must be open and driven by customer engagement. Service firms should encourage and support employee engagement during development (Storey et al., 2015). The study from Bayarçelik et al. (2014) and Storey et al. (2015) indicated that some



SMEs business leaders could gain more understanding of the value of customer-centric innovation.

The theory of diffusion of innovation suggested that an innovation-development process often begins with the recognition of a problem or a need (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Typically, heavy users encounter some problems, they think of solutions and then convince others to support their innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Social media could be one of many convenient platforms that the heavy users use to convince others to express the problems and ask for support. The challenge retailers face is how heavy users perceive their products (Oliveira & Toaldo, 2015). Retailers should design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2013). Increasingly, companies analyze the customers' opinions from social media to understand customers' preferences and customers comments about competitors' offering (He et al., 2015). Frontline employees can also gather unique and context-specific data on customer needs and problems in service delivery, as well as customer sentiment and preferences to improve service quality (Lam et al., 2017). The key to successful branding depends on how quickly companies can adopt new strategies in response to consumers' preferences (Kohli et al., 2015). In the knowledge stage, retailers could use social media technology with customer-centric approaches to improve their understanding of the preferences of consumers and the fast-changing business environment.

**Persuasion & decision stage.** According to the diffusion of innovation theory, reducing complexity, enhancing relative advantage, and increasing trialability are the factors that positively affect the innovation's diffusion (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003).

Innovations with a high relative advantage have a shorter innovation-decision period and a higher rate of adoption (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Evanschitzky, Iyer, Pillai, Kenning, & Schütte (2015) investigated innovation diffusion strategy from a supermarket chain in Germany. Evanschitzky et al. interviewed 940 participants including shoppers, consumers, and non-users. The study results indicated that a successful innovation must provide benefits to consumers as well as retailers. Another study from Reynolds and Hristov (2015) also indicated that the top two measures of innovation in the retail industry are financial factors and non-financial factors, such as brand tracking, customer satisfaction, and the number of new products. Reynolds and Hristov conducted in-depth interviews with 46 retail executives and 11 non-retail executives. The investigation result indicated that the business leaders in the retailer industry strive to deliver better customer-oriented offers, a higher speed to market, and a more effective organization (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). In the retail industry, a customer-oriented innovation idea that provides benefits to consumers and retailers could positively affect the innovation's diffusion.

The main aim of innovation at the retail front-end is to improve customers' shopping experience (European Commission, 2014). Retailers adopted different strategies to create different core competencies by improving customer's quality of life from different perspectives. For example, retailers could use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop specific strategies for innovation in channel strategy (Konus et al., 2014), innovation in products and services (Mukerjee, 2013), and innovation in pricing (Hinterhuber & Liozu, 2014). Customer-centric retailers could use

“improving customer’s quality of life” as a criterion to make their innovation-decision.

**Implementation stage.** According to the diffusion of innovation theory, implementation stage is full of challenges, especially while the implementers and the decision makers are different people (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). In the retail industry, new retail concepts change business and technological process that lead to the adoption of new knowledge and skills in retail companies (European Commission, 2014). Business model innovation is a powerful way to improve organizations’ productivity, and drives growth in sales revenue and return on sales (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015). For example, some business leaders use successful business model innovation strategies to achieve a successful business result such as customer co-creation (Khanagha et al., 2017; Lacoste, 2016) and sharing economy (Hamari et al., 2015; Kathan et al., 2016). However, creating new businesses with the new business model is always full of challenges and the failure rate is high (Christensen et al., 2016). The diffusion of innovation theory stated that learning processes could help the key stakeholders feel relieved from the uncertainty of innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). In the implementation stage, the change agents should provide sufficient information and guidance to the people who begin to use the innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). In the retail industry, entrepreneurial orientation could enhance the organizational learning capabilities and increase the market shares (Altinay et al., 2015). However, entrepreneurial orientation might have little direct effect on innovation performance unless the organization facilitates the entrepreneurial orientation with organizational learning (Alegre & Chiva, 2013). A systematic organizational learning might be necessary while the training objectives are to learn the

new knowledge and skills, such as using social media in customer engagement, and customer-centric transformation.

**Confirmation stage.** The diffusion of innovation theory states that the decision-making unit might reinforce, or reverse an innovation to avoid or reduce the state of dissonance (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). For example, the decision makers may reverse an innovation if the outcome from the implementation stage does not fulfill managements' expectation or the decision makers have found an alternative in the implementation stage (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Many scholars conducted studies on evaluating innovation with economic performance (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). For example, Mattsson and Orfila-Sintes (2014) conducted a survey in Spain to identify the relationship between the type of innovations that affect occupancy and the profitability of the hotels. However, Reynolds and Hristov (2015) argued that financial indicators, such as share price, cash flow, profit, growth, and return on investment are less suitable for immediately evaluating innovation in the fast-changing retail industry because the financial data takes time to collect, reconcile, and analyze. (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). Reynolds and Hristov (2015) interviewed 46 retail executives and 11 non-retail executives. The investigation result indicated that leaders in the retail industry often use short-term and easy to acquire indicators to measure innovation (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). With the advent of the Internet, customers have developed fast-changing taste and preference (Liu et al., 2014). How quickly a company can adopt new strategies in response to consumers' preferences is vital to a retailer's survival (Kohli et al., 2015). Retailers could use quick and easy way to acquire indicators to evaluate new strategies in response to consumers'

preferences.

Consumers and brands are the major innovation drivers in the retail sector (European Commission, 2014). Siahtiri et al. (2014) conducted an online survey and received responses from 140 senior managers from multiple industry sectors. The survey results indicated that the better customer-centric performance; the stronger brand performance retailers achieve (Siahtiri et al., 2014). Retailers might be able to get brand awareness on social media, as consumers can spread the word-of-mouth to larger groups of potential customers on social media (Kohli et al., 2015). Jang et al. (2013) conducted an online survey in Taiwan. The investigation result indicated a positive relationship between consumers' intention to use online information search and intention to purchase at online and physical stores (Jang et al., 2013). The perceived benefits from the association with a brand can boost customers' satisfaction and generate positive word-of-mouth advertising, and build brand loyalty through the brand Southern China (Lee et al., 2014). Retailers could evaluate their innovation outcome from the consumers and brands perspective to support their confirmation decisions. Retailers could also use some quick indicators such as positive word-of-mouth on social media to evaluate an innovation in the confirmation stage. Furthermore, frontline employees can also gather unique and context-specific data on customer needs and problems in service delivery. As a result, business leaders are able to detect customer sentiment and preferences to improve service quality (Lam et al., 2017). Collecting customers' feedback on innovation from frontline employees is also a good source of information to support business leaders' confirmation decisions.

**Summary.** In this study, I used the diffusion of innovations theory as a lens for understanding the successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. I explored (a) how the participants recognize problems or needs in the knowledge stage, (b) how the decision makers consider the value of an innovative idea in the persuasion and decision stage, (c) how the business leaders overcome obstacles in the implementation stage, and (d) how the company evaluates an innovation result in the confirmation stage. The business practitioners could review and potentially use the findings of this study to develop their customer-centric innovation strategies and develop capabilities that enable the firm to serve their customers better with the marketing information acquired from social media.

### **Transition**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. The population comprised business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The business practitioners could review and potentially use the research result to improve business performance by using the marketing information acquired from social media. The result of this study may impact positive social change when the local employment opportunities can increase through increased employee spending in Southern China.

I provided an overview of the multiple case study on Section 2 including the purpose of the study, my role in this study, the research method and design, the data collection process and technique, and the reliability and validity of this study. I provided analysis and present the findings, applications, and implication for social change in Section 3.

## Section 2: The Project

Section 2 is an in-depth review of the project. The intent of this multiple case study is to develop an understanding of successful strategies business leaders use to improve performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in the retailing industry. I strived for credibility during each key step of this multiple case study, including the purpose of the study, my role in this study, the research method and design, the data collection process and technique, and reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The population was business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experiences in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change through increased local employment opportunities following increased employee spending in Southern China.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In case study research, researchers have the responsibility to provide an accurate and detailed account of the case and participate in selecting cases, selecting collection and analysis methods, the explaining role of theory and ethics (Willig, 2013). In a semistructured interview setting, case study researchers should be flexible enough to interact with participants and encourage them to express their experiences freely



(Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The population comprised business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. I interacted with participants through semistructured face-to-face interviews. During the interview process, researchers act as a facilitator to enable the interviewee to talk about their experiences and express their thoughts, feelings, and views (Ritchie et al., 2013). My previous experiences in corporate training and consultation services in the retail industry helped me in facilitating the participants to express their experiences and views. The Belmont Report mandates researchers consider the nature, probability, and magnitude of risk to judge if the study harms or benefits (Hamel et al., 2014). I adopted the protocols of the Belmont Report throughout the study with integrity, respect, and proper documentation.

Grossoehme (2014) emphasized the importance of articulating biases in research because qualitative investigators may, directly and indirectly, interact with participants and influence the data. Researchers could enhance the reliability of research through prolonged engagement, dependability audits, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Yin (2014) suggested including four sections in an interview protocol: An overview of the case study, data collection procedures, data collection question, and a guide for the case study report. I used the four sections for my interview protocol as a guide to increase the reliability of this study (see Appendix A).

### **Participants**

Rigby and Bilodeau (2015) conducted a cross-country survey and received

completed responses from 1,067 international executives. The study result indicated that the participants ranked revenue growth their top priority, followed by increased profitability and cost-cutting. Rigby and Bilodeau said that the participants cited revenue growth as their main goal twice as often as other priorities. The eligibility criteria for my study participants were that they were business leaders with more than 3 years experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media, they achieved significant improvement in terms of revenue or profitability, they focused on the retail industry, and their businesses were located in Southern China.

Researchers can use the purposive sampling method to recruit initial samples with snowball sampling and ask the initial participants to nominate other eligible participants (Gyarmathy, Johnston, Caplinskiene, Caplinskas, & Latkin, 2014). I used snowball sampling to recruit participants. I asked the initial contributors to nominate other eligible participants. I assessed the qualification of the potential participants using the eligibility criteria and established trustworthiness with the interview protocol.

## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

The objective of this study was to explore successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. Researchers use the qualitative method to explore characteristics of participants to gain a detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes (Ritchie et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers gain an in-depth understanding of complex issues through direct contact with participants in their natural environment (Yin, 2014).

Qualitative methods are suitable to study decision-making processes (Groeneveld, Tummers, Bronkhorst, Ashikali, & van Thiel, 2015). As the intent of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of business leaders' strategy-making processes, I used the qualitative method for my research. Quantitative researchers use surveys to collect statistical data to closed-ended questions (Willig, 2013). Quantitative researchers identify a statistically representative sample of a population that helps to either supports or refute the theory and identify the relationships or differences among the variables (Caruth, 2013). Collecting statistical data does not fit the purpose of my study. Since the quantitative method was not appropriate for this study, a combination of the qualitative and quantitative method was not appropriate.

### **Research Design**

The strategy to ensure trustworthiness of a qualitative study starts by choosing the most appropriate data collection method to answer the research questions (Elo et al., 2014). I considered four research designs for this qualitative study: case study, narrative, ethnography, and phenomenology. The multiple case study design is the most applicable for this study. Case study researchers develop an in-depth understanding of a case from participants within a real-life context to explore patterns of particular situations (Yin, 2014). Using different sources of information to triangulate research will help both to confirm and to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Using the multiple case design offers an increased likelihood of study replication (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, I employed the multiple case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the successful strategies that business leaders used to improve business

performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. The other three designs, narrative, ethnography, and phenomenology were not applicable for this study. Narrative researchers explore an individual's experiences from the individual's storytelling and the documents related to the participant's life (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The intent of narrative research focuses on stories based on individuals' life experience, which does not fit the purpose of the study. Ethnography researchers observe, record, and interview participants' activities to describe participants in their natural culture (Spencer, 2013). Phenomenology is useful for understanding life experience through the views of the participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Ethnography and phenomenological designs were not appropriate as the focus of the study was not based on the life experience of the participants nor their cultural environment. The multiple case study design was most suitable for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

Qualitative researchers use non-probability samples for selecting the population to reflect particular features of groups within the sampled population for study (Ritchie et al., 2013). Due to the time-consuming and labor-intensive nature of qualitative data collection and analysis, qualitative research tends to work with relatively small numbers of participants (Willig, 2013). Researchers observe the population's characteristics and select samples that are well suited to small-scale, in-depth studies (Ritchie et al., 2013). In this study, I employed multiple case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the successful strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. I used the snowball sampling

design to recruit participants. I asked the initial participants to nominate other eligible participants.

Qualitative researchers could reach data saturation by asking multiple participants the same set of interview questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). I interviewed the business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested that researchers might identify data saturation when the data is sufficient to replicate the research, and obtaining new data is infeasible. Fusch and Ness suggested researchers use data triangulation to ensure data saturation. I triangulated the information collected from multiple cases and used the criteria suggested by Fusch and Ness to determine when the data collection process met data saturation.

The eligibility criteria for my study participants included (a) business leaders with more than 3 years experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media, (b) achieved significant improvement in revenue or profitability, (c) focused on the retail industry, and (d) businesses located in Southern China. The role of a researcher in an interview acts as a facilitator to enable the interviewee to talk about personal experiences and to express thoughts, feelings, and views (Ritchie et al., 2013). The physical environment of the interview setting influences communication (Stanyon, Griffiths, Thomas, & Gordon, 2016). I conducted the semistructured interviews in a private room at the participants' office and expected the

interview to last approximately an hour. Interviews were audio-recorded and confidential on transcription. Recruitment for participants ceased when data saturation was achieved.

### **Ethical Research**

A researcher has an obligation to follow all ethical and legal requirements (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The Belmont Report is a historical document that provides the moral framework for understanding regulations in the United States on the use of humans in experimental research. I adopted the protocols of the Belmont Report throughout the study with integrity, respect, and proper data documentation. I also secured approval by Walden University's Institutional Review Board to ensure I followed ethical research principles. The approval number for this study is 02-16-18-0597122. I started my data collection process after I received my IRB approval. The three basic ethical principles for research involving human subjects are respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (U.S. Department of Health & Human Service [HHS], 1979).

#### **Respect for Persons**

To achieve the ethical principles of respect for person, researchers should treat a participant as a person who has own thought and behaves at own will (HHS, 1979). The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. My participants were business leaders with more than 3 years of experience in improving business performance. I used the purposeful sampling method and did not include protected classes.

Researchers should achieve respect for person (HHS, 1979). Through the process

of informed consent, researchers should provide participants an opportunity to choose what they like to happen to them. I sent potential participants an initial email and a follow-up phone call to introduce the participants the purpose of investigation and invited them for an interview. I went over the consent form with the participants and ensured that the participants understand the objective of the study. I also explained the interview procedures and issues related to confidentiality in the interview, and the potential risks and benefits. I ensured the participants understand the voluntary nature of the interview that they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. I requested each participant to sign the consent form to confirm their understanding. I closely followed the guidance from my interview protocol to achieve the ethical principle of respect for each person.

### **Beneficence**

Researchers have an obligation to take beneficent actions to maximize possible benefits and minimize the potential harm in an investigation (HHS, 1979). The Belmont Report demands researchers to consider the nature, probability, and magnitude of the risk involved to judge if the probability of harms or benefits is reasonable (Hamel et al., 2014). Researchers have the responsibility to assess the risks and benefits systematically (HHS, 1979). I maximized the benefits for the participants and the society by contributing to the business practice and implication to social change. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to minimize the potential harm during the investigation.

I maximized the benefits by striving for the best research quality so that the findings from this study could contribute to positive social changes when the local

employment opportunities can increase through increased employee spending in Southern China. The business practitioners can review and potentially use the findings of this study to improve business performance by using the marketing information acquired from social media. Therefore, I maximized the benefits to the participants and society by making a contribution to the business practice and social change.

I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) to minimize any potential harm of the investigation. Ritchie et al. (2013) suggested keeping confidentiality of the participants. I used codes to replace real names to protect the identities of the participants' so that no comment can be linked to any individuals or companies. Moreover, I kept data secure by using a password with encryption, accessible only to me. I adhered to the ethical principle of taking actions to maximize possible benefits and reduce any potential harm to participants.

### **Fairness**

In the Belmont report, justice refers to fairness in distribution (HHS, 1979). I ensured each interview followed the same interview protocol with the same set of data collection questions. The interview protocol provided me guidance to treat each participant equally. Marshall and Rossman (2016) stated that providing a monetary incentive to participants may have a negative effect on the study. Therefore, no participant received compensation in this study.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In qualitative studies, researchers are the primary instrument of data collection (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Ritchie et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). Investigators describe,



analyze, and evaluate a case to gain an in-depth understanding of the case (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Qualitative researchers also use interviews, focus groups, observations, and a review of existing documents as data collection instruments (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). As the primary instrument of data collection, I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) and conducted member checking with participants to ensure my analysis is accurate.

Grossoehme (2014) emphasized the importance of articulating the biases in research because qualitative investigators may, directly and indirectly, interact with participants and influence the data. Researchers could enhance the reliability of research through prolonged engagement, dependability audit, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Yin (2014) also suggested including four sections in a protocol (a) an overview of the case study, (b) data collection procedures, (c) data collection question, and (d) a guide for the case study report. I used these four sections for an interview protocol as a guide to increase the reliability of this study (see Appendix A).

### **Data Collection Technique**

Qualitative researchers are the primary instrument of data collection (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). In a semistructured interview setting, case study researchers should be flexible to interact with participants' responses (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The role of a researcher in an interview acts as a facilitator to enable the interviewee to talk about personal experiences and to express thoughts, feelings, and views (Ritchie et al., 2013). I collected the lived experiences through semistructured face-to-face interviews with

participants, who were business leaders from the retail industry in Southern China.

The physical environment of the interview setting influences communication (Stanyon et al., 2016). For example, noise may affect the quality of the data collection (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). I conducted the semistructured interviews in a private room at the participants' office to minimize the interruptions. However, I also conducted interviews on telephone or Internet phone subject to the constraints, such as the interviewees' convenience or geographical distance. Using audio-recording in an interview allows the researcher to focus on listening and interacting to the participant (Ritchie et al., 2013). I captured the interviews by audio-recording. After the interview, I transcribed the interview content and provided my analysis of the participants' responses for member checking to assess the validity of my data analyses.

Using multiple sources of information to triangulate a research finding will help to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Case study researchers use multiple sources of evidence to identify and explore patterns or the themes (Yin, 2014). I used multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Researchers may increase the reliability of a case study through organizing and documenting the collected data (Yin, 2014). The sources collected from participants are usually disorderly and discursive (Ritchie et al., 2013). Case study researchers should

create a case study database to orderly compile the data before analyzing the data (Yin, 2014). I converted all evidence to an electronic format and kept all data in a password protected cloud storage with data encryption to keep the data confidential. I also created a database to keep all the resources with coding and log. I coded the sources with the correct date, location, information of the source, and correlated the data to the research questions and themes with the knowledge that I acquired from the literature review and data collection process. Using codes in place of names on all data also serves to minimize the risk to the participants as stated in the interview protocol (see Appendix A). I was responsible for all data organization process, and the data were only accessible to me. I will keep all raw data for 5 years, after completion of the study, and shred or erase all data by the end of that period.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative researchers gain an in-depth understanding of a case through describing, analyzing, and evaluating the case (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Researchers depend on the availability of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data to pursue the trustworthiness of content analysis results. The data analysis is a continuous and iterative process in three main phases: preparation, organization, and reporting (Elo et al., 2014). In the preparation phases, researchers identify the trustworthiness of the data collection method, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis (Elo et al., 2014). The organization phase includes coding, creating categories, and abstraction (Elo et al., 2014); while in the reporting phase, researchers should describe the content and structure of concepts created by content analysis in a clear and understandable way (Elo

et al., 2014). I provided an overview of my data analysis process of the three main phases below.

### **Preparation Phase**

**Data collection method.** Case study researchers develop an in-depth understanding of multiple cases review of sources of evidence to identify and explore patterns of the themes (Yin, 2014). Using multiple case study design offers an increased likelihood of study replication and more persuasive findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In this study, I employed multiple case study design to acquire information to gain an in-depth understanding of the successful strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. In a semistructured interview setting, case study researchers should be flexible to interact with participants' responses and encourage participants to express their experiences freely (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Therefore, I interacted with participants through semistructured face-to-face interviews.

**The unit of analysis.** Qualitative researchers use non-probability samples for selecting the population to reflect particular features of groups within the sampled population for study (Ritchie et al., 2013). Qualitative researchers could reach data saturation by asking multiple participants the same set of interview questions (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In this study, I interviewed the business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social

media. I used the snowball sampling design to recruit participants and the recruitment for participants ceased when data saturation was achieved.

**Making sense of the data.** Grossoehme (2014) emphasized the importance of articulating the biases in research because qualitative investigators may directly and indirectly interact with participants and influence the data. Using different sources of information to triangulate a research finding will help to confirm and to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Fusch and Ness (2015) suggested researchers use data triangulation to ensure data saturation. I triangulated the information collected from multiple cases and documents review and used the criteria suggested by Fusch and Ness to determine when the data collection process meets data saturation. After the interview, I provided participants with my analysis of their responses for member checking purposes to assess the validity of my research.

### **Organization Phase**

**Coding.** Case study researchers should create a case study database to compile data in an orderly fashion before analyzing the data (Yin, 2014). I created a database to keep all source with coding and log. I coded the sources with the corresponding dates, locations, and relevant information about the sources, and correlated the data to the research questions with the knowledge that I acquired from the literature review. I also used codes in the place of names on all data to minimize the risk to the participants.

**Creating categories and abstraction.** In a content analysis process, case study researchers are mainly focused on capturing, interpreting, and discovering meanings in the source (Ritchie et al., 2013). Researchers could examine the source to construct

answers to the research questions, then categorize the answers into themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A case study researcher analyzes and organizes the raw data to identify meaningful findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). A researcher should continue the grouping to identify any similarities and differences between categories (Elo et al., 2014). Case study researchers should seek to identify themes or categories of behavior and events rather than to document similarities and differences (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). This process continues until themes that are well supported by all available information emerge (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I examined the source that I coded in the organization phase to construct answers to my research questions and categorized the answers into themes with the knowledge that I acquired from the literature review. I developed new themes for the separate and distinct categories of findings. I also continued the grouping and analysis process until themes emerge that are well supported by all available information and reflect the purpose of the research.

### **Reporting Phase**

A researcher should allow readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the trustworthiness of the results (Elo et al., 2014). Therefore, a researcher should systematically and carefully reflect on the literature related to the research topics (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) and the relationship between the results and original data in the report (Elo et al., 2014). In the reporting phase of a case study research, the researcher should conduct a continual review of information obtained to identify the answers to the research questions. Therefore, the data analysis is a continuous and iterative process in three main phases: preparation, organization, and reporting (Elo et al.,

2014). I used the analysis result from the organization phase to construct my research report systematically and carefully. I also went back to the preparation or organization phase when necessary.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Trustworthiness is the main requirement of all qualitative research analysis commencing with the data collection to the conclusion drawn from the results (Henriksen, Polonyi, Bornsheuer-Boswell, Greger, & Watts, 2015). The strategy to ensure trustworthiness of a qualitative study starts by choosing the most appropriate data collection method to answer the research questions (Elo et al., 2014). Researchers depend on the availability of rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data to pursue the trustworthiness of content analysis results. Reliability and validity are the two important criteria for improving trustworthiness (Grossoehme, 2014).

#### **Reliability**

Dependability refers to the consistency of findings across time and among researchers (Hays, Wood, Dahl, & Kirk-Jenkins, 2016). Thus, similar findings would be expected among researchers and across studies. Researchers could enhance the reliability of research through prolonged engagement, dependability audit, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Researchers should spend sufficient time in case study sites to gain full understanding of the phenomena (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Researchers should triangulate data from multiple sources in the same topic to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013); and use member checking to ensure the analysis of the participants' interview

responses are accurate (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017; Willig, 2013). I facilitated the process in which the participants can express their experiences and views in the interview which was audio-recorded. After the interview, I transcribed the interview content and kept the transcription confidential. I also triangulated multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com to create a deeper understanding of the data. Finally, I provided my analysis of the participants' responses for member checking to ensure the credibility of my study. Furthermore, I arranged a follow-up interview if I needed further information to confirm my understanding of the participant's answer.

### **Validity**

**Credibility.** Researchers should demonstrate credibility by conducting the investigation in a believable manner (Houghton et al., 2013). Credibility refers to the overall believability of a study (Hays et al., 2016). Researchers should provide a trustable investigation result that is correct, true to the participants' meaning, and without researchers' bias (Henriksen et al., 2015). Researchers should continually examine the validity in each step of the study including sampling, phenomena capturing, labeling, interpretation, and reporting (Ritchie et al., 2013). I strived for reaching credibility in each step of my study. In the preparation phase of a study, using multiple cases design offers an increased likelihood of study replication and more persuasive findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Researchers could use different sources of information to triangulate a research finding to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013) and use member checking to verify if the analysis result makes sense to the participants



(Grossoehme, 2014). That explains why I employed multiple cases study design in this study. After the interview, I transcribed the interview content, triangulated with the various sources, and provided my analysis of the participants' responses for member checking. In the organization phase, researchers could use thematic analysis strategy to explore the data when constructing answers to the research questions, then categorize the answers into themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Researchers should continue the thematic analysis process until themes that are well supported by all available information emerge (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I used the thematic analysis strategy to explore the data that I have coded in the organization phase to construct answers to my research question and categorized the answers into themes with the knowledge that I have acquired from the literature review.

In the reporting phase, a researcher should systematically and carefully reflect on the literature related to the research topics (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017) and should also reflect on the relationship between the results and original data in the report (Elo et al., 2014). I used the analysis from the organization phase to construct my study findings systematically and carefully. I also went back to the data collection phase when necessary. In each step of this study, I conducted the investigation in a believable manner to achieve credibility.

**Transferability.** The objective of achieving transferability in a case study is to ensure other investigators can arrive at the same conclusions while repeating the same investigation on the same case with the same procedures (Yin, 2014). A researcher can enhance the transferability of a case study with case study protocol (Yin, 2014) and keep

the research decisions in a research diary (Grossoehme, 2014). With a research diary, other investigators could understand the rationale behind the original researchers' decision-making process (Grossoehme, 2014). I ensured each interview followed the same interview protocols with the same set of data collection questions. I adopted the protocols throughout the study with integrity, respect, and proper data documentation so that other investigators may repeat the same investigation on the same case with the same procedures. Furthermore, I kept a research diary so that another investigator may understand my decision process in each key step. With the protocol and research diary, other investigators may be able to arrive at the same conclusions while repeating the same investigation on the same case.

**Confirmability.** In a qualitative study, confirmability relates to the accurate reflections of participants' viewpoints without researchers' views interfering with the findings (Hays et al., 2016). In an interview process, researchers act as a facilitator to enable the interviewees to talk about their experiences and to express their thoughts, feelings, and views (Ritchie et al., 2013). Qualitative investigators should articulate the biases in research because researchers may directly and indirectly interact with participants and influence the data (Grossoehme, 2014). Researchers could enhance confirmability of the study by using strategies of triangulation and the audit trail. (Morse, Lowery, & Steury, 2014). Using different sources of information to triangulate a research finding will help to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). Researchers could achieve confirmability by using an audit trail to outline the decisions made throughout the research process to provide a rationale for the methodological and

interpretative judgments of the research (Houghton et al., 2013). I used multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com to triangulate the research findings. Furthermore, I categorized the answers into themes with the knowledge that I have acquired from the literature review and conceptual framework. I also kept an audit trail in my research diary to record my decision process and rationale to achieve confirmability.

**Data Saturation.** Reaching data saturation is critical to the validity of research (Fusch, & Ness, 2015). Galvin (2014) defines saturation as the point at which no new relevant information is forthcoming even if researchers interview more people in the process. Researchers might identify data saturation when the data is sufficient to replicate the research, and obtaining new data is infeasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). That explains why I continued the grouping and analysis process until themes emerge that are well supported by all available information and they reflected the purpose of the research. I used the analysis results to construct my findings systematically and carefully. I went back to the data collection and analysis phase until no new relevant information is forthcoming to reach saturation.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I provided an overview of the multiple case study including the purpose of the study, my role in this study, the research method and design, the data collection process and technique, and the reliability and validity of this study. I recruited participants with snowball sampling method and collect the data through semistructured face-to-face interviews. I also secured approval by the Walden's Institutional Review

Board to ensure the ethical research principles are being followed. I adopted the protocols of the Belmont Report throughout the study with integrity, respect, and proper data documentation. Finally, I presented the method I used to address the issue of reliability and validity. I provided analysis and present the findings, applications, and implication for social change in Section 3.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

Section 3 includes the findings of the study. This section contains an introduction, presentation of the findings, applications to professional practice, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and reflections. I provided a summary and conclusion of the study by the end of this section.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore successful strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. I collected the lived experiences through semistructured interviews. Participants were business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China. They all have successful experience in improving business performance by acquiring marketing information from social media.

Case study researchers use various sources of evidence to identify and explore patterns or themes (Yin, 2014). Using different sources of information to triangulate research findings will help both to confirm and improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). I used multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies that these business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. I used NVivo

11 qualitative analysis software for coding and identified seven core emergent themes, which I grouped into three main themes.

I used the diffusion of innovations theory as a lens for understanding strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. The business practitioners can review and potentially use the findings of this study to develop their customer-centric innovation strategies in each innovation stage and develop capabilities that enable firms to better serve their customers.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The research question for this study was: What successful customer-centric strategies do business leaders in Southern China use to improve business performance using the marketing information acquired from social media? Leaders of organizations could use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop specific strategies for different customer segments (Konus et al., 2014) and develop capabilities that enable the firm to serve their customers better (Trainor et al., 2014). I collected the lived experiences through semistructured interviews. Participants were business leaders from five different companies in the retail industry in Southern China who have successful experience in improving business performance using the marketing information acquired from social media. Using the interview protocol (see Appendix A), I met data saturation after five interviews which included two participants who had less than 100 employees, one participant who had more than 500 employees, and two participants from large-sized companies with parent companies on the 2017 Fortune 500

list. The major business areas of the participants are banking services, nonalcoholic beverage, small home appliances, wealth management services, and educational products.

Using multiple sources of information to triangulate research findings will help both to confirm and improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). I used multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies that business leaders used to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media. Case study researchers analyze and organize raw data to identify meaningful findings (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). During the content analysis process, researchers could use the thematic analysis strategy that analyze the collected information to construct answers to the research questions, then categorize the answers into themes (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). I used the thematic analysis strategy to analyze the collected information to construct answers to my research question and categorize the answers into themes with the knowledge that I acquired from the literature review. I identified seven core emergent themes, which I grouped into three main themes (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The Frequency of Main Themes*

Theme	<i>N</i>	% of frequency of occurrence
Knowledge Strategies	39	48.75%
Persuasion and decision strategies	11	13.75%
Implementation strategies	30	37.50%

*Note.* *n* = frequency

### **Emergent Theme 1: Knowledge Strategies**

An innovator gain understanding of innovation experiences in the knowledge stage (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). The information that acquired in the knowledge stage may motivate innovators to acquire further knowledge to formulate their innovative ideas (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). However, using social media to acquire marketing information regarding customers' changing preferences on products and services might support management in the retail industry to make informed strategic decisions (Sheng et al., 2015). Increasingly, companies analyze customer opinions from social media to understand their preferences (He et al., 2015).

Although social media is a popular tool for interacting with the public and learning about consumer concerns (Alexander, 2014), the credibility of the information accessed through social media is lower than traditional information sources (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Participants stated that ensuring the credibility of messages is one of the key success strategies that business leaders used in acquiring information from social media. The credibility of a message can be measured by the believable, reliable, and trustworthy of the message (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). The participants in this study used customer-generated content with multiple communication channel strategies to enhance the trustworthy of the marketing information acquired from social media.

**Customer generated content.** Social media users are difficult to judge on information veracity (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Furthermore, social media postings often lack authors background information for the users to ensure trust on the message (Flanagin, Metzger, Pure, Markov, & Hartsell, 2014). All participants expressed the



importance regarding the trustworthiness of the marketing information acquired from social media. P4 mentioned that some posted contents on social media might contain excessive packaging, bias, and over exaggeration. P4 noted that some social media content authors might use a sensational approach to package a fictional story as real experience. P1 confirmed P4's statement and noted that she hesitated to make business decisions based on the opinions of anonymous authors who lack association with any traceable identity in the physical world. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) indicated that fake information on social media makes people more difficult to figure out the true state of the world.

Each participant noted that acquiring customer-generated content from the appropriate social media platforms is a successful strategy in enhancing the message credibility. P3 declared that some social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo required users to register with their mobile phone number to ensure each user has a unique user identity (ID). Some social media platforms, such as WeChat offer special services for enterprise users who registered with business registration documents so that the platform can verify the identity of the enterprise user. For example, the special services that WeChat offers for enterprise users include allowing the enterprise users push feed to their own subscribers and to retrieve customer generated content within the enterprise's account on a mass scale. As each user has a unique user ID, both the consumers and vendors were easier to build trust with each other. All participants declared that they mainly use this type of social media platforms to acquire customer generated contents to support their customer-centric innovation decisions. Consumers play the most important role as being innovation drivers in the retail sector (European

Commission, 2014). Retailers should design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2013).

Some social media platforms, such as WeChat offers special functions to facilitate enterprise users to provide e-services to subscribed customers. Participants provided various types of e-services on this type of platform. Participants' company provided services on social media include e-banking, e-learning, e-procurement, and e-calendar of promotional events. P1 offered various types of e-banking services on social media, including e-payment, e-statement, e-credit card services, and various e-personal banking services. P1 indicated that if a customer used the banking services on social media, P1 could associate the client's social media ID with the bank's internal record. P1 commented that the client generated content is reliable and valuable. P1 has the confidence to use this type of information to support her customer-centric innovation-decision. User-generated content has important practical implications for a marketer (Schivinski, & Dabrowski, 2016). Managers have paid increasing attention to consumers' self-generated content because of its significant impact on product sales (Tang, Fang, & Wang, 2014).

**Multiple communication channel strategies.** Jang et al. (2013) suggested retailers communicate and provide services to customers through both offline and online channels. The retailers who use limited communication channels may not fully engage with all potential customers (Rezaei & Ismail, 2014). Participants noted that they used both online and offline channels for customer engagement. P2, P4, and P5 used social media to attract potential customers to participate in their offline customer activities, such

as product seminars, roadshow, and factory tours. They acquired explicit and tacit knowledge in customer engagement by their frontline staffs. Tacit and explicit knowledge are the key components of knowledge (Chuang et al., 2016). A firm may establish a competitive advantage through acquiring explicit and tacit knowledge in customer engagement (Schoenherr et al., 2014). Frontline employees can gather unique and context-specific data on customer needs and problems in service delivery (Lam et al., 2017). When promotions interact well with service operations, the level of customer satisfaction is significantly affected (Ramanathan et al., 2017).

P2 and P3 use multiple sources of information to generate aggregated statistical analysis report to support their business decisions. P2 collected and analyzed the collected information through the public affairs and communications department. The public affairs and communications department collects customers' feedback on social media and triangulate the information collected from offline channels. P3 confirmed P2's statement on the importance of aggregated statistical analysis. P3 used a big data analysis system to analyze the customer's opinions from multiple communication channels and provides aggregated statistical analysis reports for each business unit. Big data technology is a useful tool for analyzing the customers' behavior (Donnelly et al., 2015). Using different sources of information to triangulate a research finding will help to confirm and to improve the precision of the data (Ritchie et al., 2013). With the information collected from multiple communication channels, managers can work with cross-functional team members to employ tactics that foster service innovation (Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramírez, 2017).

P1 used a deep learning system (DL) to analyze customers' behaviors. The system recorded customer journeys on customers' online operation through various channels including the social media and the official websites. P1 noted that the DL system collected comprehensive information from the multi-channel of multi-product lines. Analysis of customer journeys enhances customer service providers' interactions by improving the customer experience associated with each touchpoint (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Customer journey mapping is an increasingly popular strategic management tool praised by both academics and practitioners for its usefulness in understanding an organization's customer experiences (Rosenbaum et al., 2017).

Table 2

*The frequency of Themes for the Acquire Information Strategies*

Theme	<i>N</i>	% of frequency of occurrence
Customer generated content	24	61.54%
Multiple communication channel strategies	15	38.46%

*Note.* *n* = frequency

**Emergent Theme 2: Persuasion and Decision Strategies**

The theory of diffusion of innovation suggested that an innovation process often begins with the recognition of a problem or a need (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). The key to successful branding depends on how quickly a company can adopt new strategies in response to consumers' preferences (Kohli et al., 2015). The major challenges in the innovation strategies formulating process are (a) their entrepreneurial orientation and innovativeness, (b) their flexibility, (c) their adaptability, (d) their inter-departmental

interactivity, and (e) their relationships with local community and other stakeholders (Leonidou, Christodoulides, Kyrgidou, & Palihawadana, 2017).

**Formulate customer-centric innovation.** All participants noted that their business leaders and experts of each business section are responsible for formulating the customer-centric business strategies. P5 stated that her expert team, including product experts, marketing experts, communication experts, and customer relationship management experts analyzed the customers' need to formulate the customer-centric business strategies. P1 mentioned that their deep learning system consolidated the information into a decision tree for the business leaders and subject matter experts to formulate the customer-centric innovation plan. P1 mentioned that the senior managers might amend the plan based on the company's policy and previous experiences. Comparing with the employees under Western culture, Chinese employees more tend to follow instructions from their employers and strive to maintain good relationships with their peers (Huang, 2016; Li & Sun, 2015). An innovation plan with key stakeholders' buy-in might also have the subordinates' buy-in as Chinese subordinates obey their superiors and strive to maintain a balance with peers.

**Key stakeholders' support.** Managing change is not easy especially for large organizations (Worley & Mohrman, 2014). Tobias (2015) claimed that about 70% of all change initiatives fail. Implementation stage is full of challenges, especially while the implementers and the decision makers are different people (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Regardless of initial support, controversy and resistance always make change project initiatives fail (Andersson, 2015). However, all participants indicated that they have no

obstacles in implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the marketing information acquired from social media. They received strong support from all key stakeholders. P1 stated that the record of customers' activities on social media represents the customer's own desire. The data are more convincing than what was based on their experiences only. P3 uses a big data analysis system to analyze the customer's opinions from multiple communication channels and provides aggregated statistical analysis reports for each business unit. P3 stated that they never encountered obstacles from customer-centric innovation projects. P3's company adheres to customer-centric corporate culture. Once the big data system identified an area that needs to be improved, his colleagues will take all necessary actions to satisfy the customers. Internal customers are an important stakeholder group (Grace & Lo Iacono, 2015). The satisfaction of internal and external customers should have higher priority over the factors of quantitative efficiency (Esbenshade et al., 2016). A customer-centric organization could acquire customer preferences and expectations to gain support from the internal and external customers to reduce obstacles to organization change.

Table 3

*The frequency of Themes for the Persuasion and Decision Strategies*

Theme	<i>N</i>	% of frequency of occurrence
Formulate customer-centric innovation	4	36.36%
Key stakeholder's support	11	63.64%

*Note.* *n* = frequency

### **Emergent Theme 3: Implementation & Confirmation Strategies**

According to the diffusion of innovation theory, reducing complexity, enhancing relative advantage, and increasing trialability are the factors that positively affect the innovation's diffusion (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). In the retail industry, new retail concepts change business and technological process that lead to the adoption of new knowledge and skills in retail companies (European Commission, 2014). Business model innovation is a powerful way to improve an organization's productivity, and drives growth in sales revenue and return on sales (Cucculelli & Bettinelli, 2015). The diffusion of innovation theory also states that the decision-making unit might reinforce, or reverse an innovation to avoid or reduce the state of dissonance (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003).

**Innovation drivers.** Consumers play the most important role in driving innovations in the retail sector (European Commission, 2014). P5 mentioned that the world is changing fast and competition is keen. She must find new ways to deal with the change and competition. P4 confirmed P1's statement that there had been earth-shaking changes in the technologies of social media and e-commerce. Using a traditional way that developed before the internet era to do business is no longer applicable. P2 declared that the popularity of mobile internet makes everything changed, including the way how to work, the way how to learn, and the way of the daily communication. P2 applied social media for internal and external communication. With the advent of the internet, customers have developed fast-changing tastes and preferences; retailers must, therefore, design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2014). How

quickly a company can adopt new strategies in response to consumers' changing preferences on products and services is vital to a retailer's survival (Kohli et al., 2015).

**Customer-centric innovation.** Consumers play the most important role as being innovation drivers in the retail sector (European Commission, 2014). The investment in enhancing customer relationships using social media technology rarely provides direct value to a firm unless business leaders use the marketing information acquired from social media to increase customer satisfaction (Trainor et al., 2014). The business leaders in the retailer industry strive to improve customer-centric offers, speed to market, and organization effectiveness (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). Each participant introduced their successful experience in customer-centric innovation. P1 and P4 introduced their experience on innovation on marketing strategies. P3 and P2 introduced their experience on product innovation. P5 introduced her innovation on operation management. Retailers should design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2013). Improved customer-centric performance creates a strong brand performance for retailers (Siahtiri et al., 2014).

**Confirmation strategy.** The diffusion of innovation theory states that the decision-making unit might reinforce or reverse an innovation to avoid or reduce the state of dissonance in the confirmation stage (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Each participant declared that they gained significant improvement in business performance from customer-centric innovation. For example, P2 and P3 successfully improved their brand awareness, P2 and P4 successfully expanded her market coverage and business network, and P4 and P5 have successfully increased the revenue. Successful innovation must



provide benefits to consumers as well as retailers (Evanschitzky et al., 2015). Although all participants gained significant improvement in business performance from their customer-centric innovation, they mainly used non-financial performance indicators to evaluate their customer-centric innovation. Non-financial performance indicators include customer satisfaction, employee retention, and teamwork (Simon et al., 2015). Retailers might be able to get brand awareness on social media, as consumers can spread the word-of-mouth to larger groups of potential customers on social media (Kohli et al., 2015). The customers' feedback from social media is one of the indicators. P2, P4, and P5 used attendance of the marketing event as another indicator. They also collected customers' feedback from frontline employees to evaluate the innovation result. Financial indicators, such as share price, cash flow, profit, and growth are less suitable for immediately evaluating innovation in the fast-changing retail industry because the financial data takes time to collect, reconcile, and analyze (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). Business leaders are able to detect customer sentiment and preferences to improve service quality (Lam et al., 2017). The customers feedback on innovation collected by frontline employees can be a good source of information to support business leaders' confirmation decisions.

In the implementation stage, the change agents should provide sufficient information and guidance to the people who implement innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Participants noted that learning is a key success strategy when implementing customer-centric innovation. P2 used an e-learning platform to provide learning services for internal customers and public on the social media. They developed 90 training videos. Each video only lasts for 10-15 minutes so that their staffs can learn about social media at

their leisure. P5 stated that her company offered daily staff training. They have a half hour internal training section every day. The training topics included entrepreneurial orientation, company culture, and professional skills. P3 also stated that cultivating a positive company culture was critical to their success. In the retail industry, the business leaders could use entrepreneurial orientation and systematic organizational learning to enhance the organizational learning capabilities and increase the market shares (Altinay et al., 2015). The diffusion of innovation theory stated that learning processes could help the key stakeholders feel relieved from the uncertainty of innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003).

Table 4

*The frequency of Themes for the Implementation and confirmation strategies*

Theme	N	% of frequency of occurrence
Innovation drivers	11	36.67%
Customer-centric Innovation	9	30.00%
Confirmation strategy	10	33.33%

*Note.* n = frequency

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

With the advent of the internet, customers have developed fast-changing tastes and preferences; retailers must, therefore, design their offering with the customer's preferences in mind (Liu et al., 2014). Leaders of an organization can use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop capabilities that better serve customers (Trainor et al., 2014). Sales organizations may generate more revenue by improving customer communication for the purpose of understanding what customers think (Ming & Yazdanifard, 2014).

Business leaders of the retail industry in Southern China may review and potentially use the findings of this study to improve business performance by using the marketing information acquired from social media. Innovation diffusion theory provides a 5-stage framework that includes (a) the knowledge stage, (b) the persuasion stage, (c) the decision stage, (d) the implementation stage, and (e) the confirmation stage (Coggio, 2015). In the knowledge stage, business leaders may pay attention to consumers' self-generated content because of its significant impact on product sales (Tang et al., 2014). Furthermore, the business leaders also may use multiple sources, including online and offline from customer engagements to triangulate the acquired knowledge to improve the precision of the information (Ritchie et al., 2013).

In the persuasion and decision stage, business leaders and experts play a critical role because of Chinese place importance on hierarchy and interpersonal harmony (Li & Sun, 2015). A customer-centric organization could use social media to acquire customer preferences and expectations to establish a vision of the change, communicate the vision to stakeholders, and gain support from internal and external customer; to reducing obstacles to organization change. In the implementation stage, business leaders in the retailer industry strive to deliver customer preferred offers, at a higher speed to market, through a more effective organization (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015).

Financial indicators, such as share price, cash flow, profit, and growth are less suitable for immediately evaluating innovation in the fast-changing retail industry because the financial data takes time to collect, reconcile, and analyze (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). Business leaders could use non-financial performance indicators to

evaluate the innovation (Simon et al., 2015). Furthermore, business leaders could use entrepreneurial orientation and systematic organizational learning to enhance capabilities and increase market share (Altinay et al., 2015). Business leaders in Southern China could implement the information produced by this study to improve capabilities and competitiveness.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This study explored successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. Retailers may find their new competitive edge from a customer-centric perspective (Heinonen, 2014). Improved customer-centric performance creates a strong brand performance for retailers (Siahtiri et al., 2014). Retailers could use social media as a tool for developing and maintaining a relationship with customers, enhancing brand relationship quality, and improving business performance (Agnihotri et al., 2016; Hudson et al., 2016; Zhan et al., 2016). Using social media technology with customer-centric approaches might help retailers to improve their understanding of customer preferences by heavy users in a fast-changing business environment.

I designed the conceptual framework for this study with the diffusion of innovations theory. The 5-stage framework is applicable for mapping the innovation processes (Boaz et al., 2016). Business practitioners could review and use the findings of this study to refine customer-centric innovation strategies to develop capabilities that enable their firm to serve customers better with the marketing information acquired from social media. Hence, some firms in the retail market in Southern China have the potential

to enhance Southern China economy through economic growth. The findings from this study may contribute to positive social change through local employment opportunities and increased employee spending in Southern China.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Using traditional ways that developed before the internet era to acquire marketing information on the customers' changing preferences on products and services in a fast-moving business world is insufficient to support management in the retail industry to make informed strategic decisions (Sheng et al., 2015). Increasingly, companies analyze the customers' opinions from social media to understand customers' preferences and customers' comments (He et al., 2015). Firms should use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop specific strategies for different customer segments (Konus et al., 2014). The components that affect the success of innovation are contextually environment given the characteristics of innovations and innovators (Wejnert, 2002). The dimensions of culture also affect innovation diffusion patterns in different markets (Desmarchelier & Fang, 2016).

By considering the four recommendations; business leaders in the retail industry in Southern China may be able to improve business performance through customer-centric innovation and the marketing information acquired from social media. Firstly, message credibility is a critical area of communication research (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Business leaders may enhance message credibility by analyzing customer-generated content with potential organizational improvements. Secondly, comparing with the employees under Western culture, Chinese employees more tend to follow

instructions from their employers and strive to maintain good relationships with their peers (Huang, 2016; Li & Sun, 2015). Strong support for an innovative idea from key stakeholders and all other internal and external customers could be critical to the success of innovation diffusion for these retailers. Thirdly, financial indicators, such as share price, cash flow, profit, and growth are less suitable for immediately evaluating innovation in the fast-changing retail industry (Reynolds & Hristov, 2015). Business leaders could use non-financial performance indicators, such as customer satisfaction, employee retention, teamwork, and safety to evaluate the effectiveness of innovations (Simon et al., 2015). Fourthly, educating key stakeholders may relieve the uncertainty of innovation (Rogers & Olaguera, 2003). Systematic organizational learning coupled with training objectives may lead to new knowledge and skills.

The business practitioners in the retail industry in Southern China might use the results from this study to improve business performance with customer-centric innovation. I will disseminate the result of this study through social media, business journals, and e-conferences. I may circulate the result of this study in my training courses and consultation services.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling, instead of statistical analysis techniques (Palinkas et al., 2015). The findings from this multiple case study cannot reach statistical generalization because of the small population size. Researchers could use the finding of this study to conduct quantitative studies to investigate a larger sample size of participants in the retail industry in Southern China.

The dimensions of culture may affect innovation diffusion patterns in different markets (Desmarchelier & Fang, 2016). Various factors, such as the industry and environmental pressure affected the diffusion of innovation (Kurnia et al., 2015). Therefore, the successful experience of innovation in a country might not be able to replicate in another industry. Researchers could further investigate successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders use in other industries or geographical locations.

### **Reflections**

Prior to beginning this study, I was not sure if I could recruit sufficient participants within a reasonable timeframe. Research data indicated that social media is a popular advertising tool in China. However, I did not find any data indicating that acquiring marketing information from social media to support customer-centric innovation is popular in China. Furthermore, the average company size of 95% of companies was less than 100 employees (NBS, 2017b). Many SME may have challenges using social media to support customer-centric innovation due to lack of capital, lack of expertise to interpret the data, and conflicting models (Coleman et al., 2016; Donnelly et al., 2015). More importantly, if using social media to support customer-centric innovation is not feasible for smaller sized companies in China, my study might not be able to contribute a reasonable social change in the retail markets in Southern China.

The recruitment process was not as difficult as what I had predicted. The participants from various size companies were willing to support my study because the participants anticipated they implement the knowledge produced by this study to enhance their competitiveness. In this study, I met data saturation after five interviews which

included two participants who had less than 100 employees, one participant who had more than 500 employees, and two participants from large-sized companies with parent companies on the 2017 Fortune 500 list. The findings of this study indicated that the participants from smaller size companies do not have public affairs and communications department to collect and analyze data.

The collected information and they do not have big data and AI tools to generate aggregated statistical analysis report to support their business decisions. However, the business leaders from small-sized companies can acquire information from social media to support customer-centric innovation through the interaction with customers on social media. Small-sized retailers may use the 5-stage framework to review their innovation processes. Small-sized firms in the retail market in Southern China have the potential to enhance their Southern China economy with increased employment.

### **Conclusion**

With the advent of the internet, customers have developed fast-changing preferences; retailers must, therefore, design their offering with customer orientation (Liu et al., 2014). Leaders of an organization can use the marketing information acquired from social media to develop capabilities to address potential improvement opportunities (Trainor et al., 2014). A customer-centric organization could use social media to acquire customer preferences and expectations to establish a vision of the change, communicate the vision with the stakeholders, and gain support from the internal and external customer to reduce obstacles to organization change. More effective communication through sales organizations may result in greater total sales due to a better understanding of customer



preferences. (Ming & Yazdanifard, 2014). Improved customer-centric performance creates a strong brand performance for retailers (Siahtiri et al., 2014).

In this study, I used the diffusion of innovations theory as a lens for understanding the successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance through marketing information acquired from social media. I explored (a) how the participants recognized problems or needs in the knowledge stage, (b) how the decision makers considered the value of an innovative idea in the persuasion and decision stage, (c) how the business leaders overcame obstacles in the implementation stage, and (d) how the company evaluated an innovation result in the confirmation stage. Business practitioners could use the findings of this study to develop their own customer-centric innovation strategies while addressing potential improvement opportunities through the marketing information acquired from social media.

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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

### **An Overview of the Case Study**

1. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study is to explore successful strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China.
2. The research question is: What successful customer-centric strategies do business leaders in Southern China use to improve business performance using the information acquired from social media? The interview question will consist of 7 open-ended questions to gain insights from business leaders in retail industry about their experiences in using customer-centric strategies to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China.
3. The eligibility criteria for my study participants will include (a) business leaders with more than 3 years experience in improving business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media, (b) achieved significant improvement in revenue or profitability, (c) focused on the retail industry, and (d) businesses located in Southern China.
4. Location of Interview: The meetings will hold on the company site or by teleconference, depending on each participant's schedule.
5. Language: English, Mandarin, or Cantonese, depending on the interviewees' preference. I will transcript the interview record in English.
6. Duration: Approximately 60 minutes.

7. I will collect multiple sources of evidence including interview transcripts, official website, and social media sites such as WeChat, Taobao, and JD.com. Data will be kept secure by password protection, data encryption, and use of codes in place of names.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

1. Selecting participants

Researcher will contact participants by email or phone about selection as participant.

2. Setting time and place for interview

Researcher will contact participants by email or phone to set time and place.

3. Confirm the participant's understanding:

Thank you for your participation in my study. I am doctoral of business administration candidate at Walden University. The objective of my study is to explore successful customer-centric strategies that business leaders use to improve business performance with the marketing information acquired from social media in Southern China. I will go over the consent form, and I will appreciate you to sign the consent form devised to meet our human subject protection requirements. Please be reminded that you can withdraw from the interview at any time. I would like to thank you for your voluntary participation.

4. Ask permission to record the interview:

With your permission, I would like to tape-record and note-taking our conversation to get a comprehensive record of your views. The record will be kept secure in a password protected encryption format. Only I will have access to the records. Only I have the authorization to listen to the record. The research results will describe what you and others have said in summary, and I will not disclose your and your organization's name. The interview may last 45 to 75 minutes and additional time may be required as needed. To enhance the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument, I will use member checking. After the interview, I will write a two-page summary of the analysis of the data collected and emailed to you for input and feedback. Would you allow me to record the interview?

5. Participants background:
  - Years of experience in the industry:\_\_\_\_\_
  - Major role in your company:\_\_\_\_\_
  - Major targeted business:\_\_\_\_\_
  - Company size:\_\_\_\_\_
  - Major targeted business location:\_\_\_\_\_
6. Begin interview from the first data collection question to the final question.
7. Follow up with additional questions.
8. Collect various sources of evidence:

Would you please provide me archival records? Alternatively, would you find more convenient to provide me the record via e-mail?

9. Recap contact information for follow-up questions.

### **Data Collection Question**

1. How does your company acquire information from social

media to support customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement?

8. How have you selected the information acquired from social media to support customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement?
9. How does your company implement customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the marketing information acquired from social media?
10. What are the major obstacles in implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the marketing information acquired from social media?
11. How have you addressed the major obstacles when implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the marketing information acquired from social media?
12. What are the strategies you adopted to maximize the benefit of implementing customer-centric strategies for business performance improvement with the marketing information acquired from social media?
13. What additional information would you like to share that may not have been addressed in the interview questions that relate to improving business performance using information from social media?

### **A Guide for the Case Study Report**

1. How the attributes of innovations affect the strategies that business leaders use in the different stages of diffusion of innovation?

2. How the participants successfully addressed their major obstacles and maximized the use of information from social media in the different stages of diffusion of innovation?