

2019

# Small Business Owners' Consumer Brand Engagement Strategies in Social Media

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Adam M. Hunsicker

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The Office of the Provost

Walden University  
2019

Abstract

Small Business Owners' Consumer Brand Engagement Strategies in Social Media

by

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MBA, The Citadel: The Military College of South Carolina, 2012

BS, Franklin University, 2008

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

August 2019

## Abstract

Since 2004, the economic relevance of small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the United States has steadily declined while large-scale enterprises' contributions have increased. Large-scale enterprises have maximized opportunities to engage consumers through social media and have created competitive advantages compared to SMEs. The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs used to positively affect their brands' equity. Relationship marketing and customer relationship management provided the conceptual framework for the study. Data were collected through interviews with 8 craft brewery business owners in the Southeastern United States and content collected from the social media pages of each business. Data were analyzed using within-case and cross-case techniques. Themes that emerged from data analysis included the cost-benefit of social media over traditional marketing platforms, the significance of establishing and maintaining relationships, and the importance of constant and continuous contact with customers. SME leaders may benefit from the results of this study by furthering their knowledge and understanding of social media consumer engagement strategies that positively impact brand equity. Findings may provide owners of small businesses with strategies that may result in social and economic benefits including new employment opportunities, increased revenue, and economic stability in local communities.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to my wife, Amy, and my children, Skylar, Noah, and Ayden. They each provided me with support and encouragement in their individual ways throughout my doctoral journey. They understood and forgave my absences from recitals, games, and countless other events so I could complete my study.

## Acknowledgments

I am forever indebted to those who assisted and supported me along the way to successful completion. First, I would like to thank all those in the military whom I had the privilege to serve under and alongside and who taught me about discipline, fortitude, and duty. Without these traits, I would not have accomplished this goal. To Dr. Timothy Malone and Dr. Kim Critchlow, thank you for your leadership and direction over the journey of this study. Each gave me the support, guidance, and direction as my committee members to become an independent scholar and complete this study. Thank you each as well for your knowledge sharing and reviews that reinforced the standards and excellence expected in the pursuit of a doctoral degree.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Most businesses in the United States (99.7%) meet the small-to-medium enterprise (SME) definition established by the U.S. Small Business Administration Office of Advocacy (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2016a). According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (2016a), since 2004, SMEs' contribution to the labor force and gross domestic product of the United States has steadily declined while large-scale enterprises' (LSEs') contributions have increased. Calli and Clark (2015) stated that LSEs' successful adoption of social media engagement strategies had provided competitive advantages for LSEs over SMEs, resulting in increased brand equity. SME leaders, however, may reap the same competitive and brand equity benefits as their LSE counterparts if they can develop and implement successful social media consumer brand engagement strategies (He, Wang, & Zha, 2014). It is, therefore, imperative to explore and understand what social media strategies SME leaders implement to engage consumers and positively impact brand equity. In this study, I explored the social media consumer brand engagement strategies that leaders of SMEs in the craft beer industry used to positively affect their brands' equity-

### **Background of the Problem**

The ability of SME leaders to compete in a global marketplace is full of challenges. Economic and social constraints limit the opportunities for SMEs to successfully increase their brand equity and obtain competitive advantages over LSEs (Calli & Clark, 2015). The success of SMEs may depend on the ability of the business

leaders to increase the equity in their brand through relational exchanges. Transferring organizational marketing strategies from a transactional to a relational basis may enable firms to focus resources on the value that long-lasting relationships provide. Yoganathan, Jebarajakirthy, and Thaichon (2015) established that relationships and long-term bonds increase consumer loyalty and enhance brand equity.

Social media provides a vehicle by which SME leaders engage consumers and create relationships at little to no cost (He et al., 2014) resulting in increased brand equity (Calli & Clark, 2015). Successful social media engagement strategies are a result of frequently refreshed and effective communication (He et al., 2014) that transforms the consumer into an active participant in the brand communication strategy of the firm (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Despite the significant impacts that social media may have on the performance of the brand, some business leaders do not understand the full potential impact of social media and social media marketing strategies on the brand (Kohli, Suri, & Kapoor, 2015).

### **Problem Statement**

The dramatic growth and evolution of social media are disrupting traditional methodologies of engagement and brand management (Kohli et al., 2015). Globally, 1 out of every 5 individuals actively used social media in 2014 (Meshi, Tamir, & Heekeren, 2015); within the United States, 61% of adults used social media (Lin, Lee, Jin, & Gilbreath, 2017). The general business problem was that small business owners have insufficient social media marketing strategies to remain competitive and grow their

brands. The specific business problem was that some leaders of SMEs lack the social media consumer brand engagement strategies required to positively affect their brands' equity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs use to positively affect their brands' equity. Relationship marketing and customer relationship management provided the conceptual framework for the study. The participant population consisted of eight craft brewery business leaders located in the Southeastern United States who have demonstrated their experience in developing and deploying strategies that positively affect their brands' equity. The implications for positive social change include the potential for this study to provide strategies to small business owners that may result in economic growth including new employment opportunities, increased revenues, and economic stability within their local communities.

### **Nature of the Study**

I considered the use of three research methodologies in the study: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Researchers who use a qualitative methodology attempt to provide an understanding of a phenomenon through findings extrapolated from the real-world experiences and perceptions of participants (Yilmaz, 2013). A qualitative researcher relies on previously vetted theory to shape the research design (Wright, O'Brien, Nimmon, Law, & Mylopoulos, 2016). Because I was exploring what social

media consumer brand engagement strategies positively affect brand equity through the individual experiences and perceptions of SME leaders, qualitative methodology was appropriate. Researchers who use quantitative methodology examine, measure, and analyze relationships independently of individual experiences and perceptions (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014). Wright et al. (2016) indicated that researchers using quantitative methodology intend to examine a phenomenon by testing variables. To answer the research question in this study, individual experiences and perceptions were vital to the development of knowledge surrounding what strategies business leaders use. Quantitative methods were not appropriate for this study because the methodologies focus on relationships between defined variables. Researchers who use a mixed-methods approach focus on both exploration and examination by combining qualitative and quantitative measures within the same study (Vankatesh, Brown, & Bala, 2013). Furthermore, researches using mixed methods rely on each method to fill in the gaps of the other method. As with the quantitative methods, a mixed-methods approach was not appropriate for this study because the research question did not suggest a need to define and test variables.

In selecting the appropriate research design, I considered the qualitative research designs of the case study, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology before choosing a case study design. The case study researcher seeks to explain, describe, or explore (Crowe et al., 2011) a phenomenon through the use of multiple lenses (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Researchers employing case study designs intend to answer *how*, *what*, and *why*

questions (Crowe et al., 2011). I chose a multiple case study design as the best fit for this study because I was seeking to answer a what research question using multiple sources of data. A case study enabled me to differentiate among the occurrences of participant experiences (see Yin, 2014) regarding social media consumer brand engagement strategies that positively affect brand equity. Researchers using a narrative inquiry design explore the phenomenon through the interpretation of stories told by the participants in the study (Wang & Geale, 2015). Wang and Geale (2015) added that through participant stories, a narrative inquiry provides a researcher with subjective interpretations of participant experiences. A narrative inquiry design did not support the objective of the current study and was therefore not suitable. A researcher using a phenomenological design seeks to obtain experiential meanings of a phenomenon through the exploration of participants' lived experiences (Quay, 2016). Researchers who use a phenomenological design are interested in understanding how subjective interpretations shape the decisions and actions of the individuals (Honer & Hitzler, 2015). A phenomenological design does not require other data collection methods to validate participants' perceptions and the effectiveness of participants' decisions, rendering the phenomenological design inappropriate for this study.

### **Research Question**

What social media engagement strategies do SME leaders use to positively affect their brands' equity?



### **Interview Questions**

1. What social media platform do you use to engage consumers and positively affect your brand's equity?
2. What consumer brand strategies have you implemented on each social media site to positively affect your brand's equity?
3. How did you address the barriers to implementing your social media consumer brand strategies for positively affecting your brand's equity?
4. How do you measure your social media consumer brand engagement strategies' effectiveness?
5. What strategies do you employ to affect your brand's image on social media platforms positively?
6. What strategies have you implemented to affect brand quality issues on social media platforms?
7. How have you used social media platforms to increase customer loyalty?
8. What other information regarding your consumer brand engagement strategies through social media would you like to share?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Knapp (2017) stated that the conceptual framework details the main ideas, concepts, and relationships within a study that guide the research design, methods of inquiry, and empirical examination. The conceptual framework I chose for this study was the relationship marketing theory. Berry (2008) introduced the relationship marketing

theory in 1983, and the later works of various scholars advanced the theory (Gronroos, 1996; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Sheth, Gardner, & Garrett, 1988; Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995). Sheth et al. (1988) proposed various relationship marketing definitions and explanations for the organizational shift from transactional exchanges to relational exchanges. The primary tenets of relationship marketing proposed by Agariya and Singh (2011) are (a) trust, (b) satisfaction, (c) loyalty, (d) commitment, (e) quality, and (f) communication.

In support of the relationship marketing theory, I referenced the customer relationship management (CRM) theory for my review of my study's results. CRM expanded the relationship marketing theory through a focus on creating relationships that benefit both the firm and customer (Yoganathan et al., 2015) through engagement and two-way communication (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Kumar (2014) stated that CRM is intended to increase customer retention through enhancing and managing customer relationships. Business leaders and marketers implementing CRM strategies transferred their focus from independent transactional exchanges to customer loyalty driven exchanges resulting in repeat purchases and cross-selling opportunities (Iruka & Ateke, 2014).

### **Operational Definitions**

*Brand awareness:* Brand awareness is a term associated with consumer recognition of the unique qualities and images of a brand (Barreda, Bilgihan, Nusair, & Okumus, 2015).

*Brand equity:* Brand equity is a reference to the assets and liabilities that result from the value provided to consumers from a brand, the brand name, or brand symbol (Aaker, 1991) and derived from the constructs of brand loyalty, brand image, perceived brand quality, and brand awareness (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

*Brand image:* Brand image refers to the benefits associated with the brand that make the brand clear, distinct, and different in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 2013).

*Brand loyalty:* The repeat buying behaviors and favorable associations resulting from consumers' positive attitudes toward the brand is known as brand loyalty (Yoganathan et al., 2015).

*Consumer brand engagement:* Consumer brand engagement denotes the dynamic actions and processes between the consumer and the brand resulting in interactions that generate value (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeck, 2013).

*Customer relationship management (CRM):* CRM is an organizational leadership strategy derived from the principles of relationship marketing that emphasizes increasing customer value and service quality through the establishment of long-term relationships (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016).

*Perceived brand quality:* The brand equity construct of perceived brand equity indicates a consumer's subjective perception of a product's superiority over other brands (Vera, 2015).

*Relationship marketing:* Relationship marketing is a reference to the establishment, development, and maintenance of exchanges established from the transfer of value between involved parties (Morgan & Hunt, 1994).

*Small-to-medium enterprise (SME):* In the United States, the SME classification of a firm is dependent on industry and metrics including either employee count or revenue or both as the criteria (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2016a). The Office of Advocacy, U.S. Small Business Administration, generally defined SMEs as having fewer than 500 employees (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2016a).

*Social media:* Social media are the online technologies that facilitate participation, sharing, interaction, and corroboration among users (He et al., 2014).

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

#### **Assumptions**

This study included several assumptions about the craft beer industry and the study participants. Assumptions are the researcher's subjective experiences and perceptions embedded throughout the study that influence data generation and analysis (Roulston & Shelton, 2015). One assumption I made was that a qualitative multiple case study design was the most appropriate methodology to answer the research question. I also assumed that all participants in the study understood the interview questions and provided honest and accurate answers related to social media use, customer engagement, and brand equity results. Also, I assumed that the content I collected from the social media pages of each SME was unedited and complete.

**Limitations**

Limitations represent the shortcomings in the research that may hinder the validity of the results (Brutus, Aguinis, & Wassmer, 2012). One limitation of this study was the dependence on eight craft breweries for the data collection that may not have been indicative of all SMEs in the Southeastern United States. Other SME leaders in different industries may have different consumer engagement strategies that would change the results. A second limitation was the inability to meet and conduct the semistructured interviews in person. I conducted all interviews over the phone, narrowing my findings to only the spoken words of the participants.

**Delimitations**

Delimitations are the conditions that constrain the scope of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In this study, I interviewed leaders of craft beer organizations and focused on the strategic use of social media to engage consumers and increase brand equity. The delimiting factors were the location, sample population, and individual participation criteria. I only considered companies that brew beer in the Southeastern United States. Participants had to have an active social media presence, an additional delimiting factor. Another delimitation was business leaders who have demonstrated experience in developing and deploying strategies that positively affect their brands' equity.

### **Significance of the Study**

Firm leaders acknowledge social media as one of the most powerful platforms to use in engaging customers and forging meaningful and enduring relationships (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Leckie, Nyadzayo, and Johnson (2016) indicated that there are numerous business benefits in forging meaningful relationships between the consumer and the brand. Therefore, conducting this study could be significant to the practice of business by providing a greater understanding of the value of interaction, cooperation, and collaboration with customers, and may create an opportunity to positively affect their brands' equity (see De Vries & Carlson, 2014).

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

My findings may contribute to the effective practice of business through the exploration of successful strategies SME leaders use to engage consumers through social media. SME leaders may benefit from improved policies and procedures to more effectively implement social media engagement strategies. SME leaders' abilities to effectively use social media may result in improved content sharing, conversation with customers, accessibility, ability to obtain customer identities, firm and brand reputation, relationships with customers, and group associations (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Calli and Clark (2015) suggested that SME leaders who successfully employed social media consumer brand engagement strategies could create business opportunities to lower costs by directly engaging consumers more efficiently.

Additionally, SME leaders who implement social media consumer brand engagement

strategies successfully may be able to obtain market data needed for expanding into new and global markets (Calli & Clark, 2015).

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include the potential to positively affect communities through new employment opportunities, increased revenues, economic stability, and improved living conditions. SMEs are a vital component to the economic stability of a community. Furthermore, SMEs' ability to increase brand equity may provide the needed resources within the community to reduce poverty (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). The findings of the study may also provide consumers with improved information and content that may assist them in understanding and shaping organizational offerings towards the needs of the community.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The literature review is an exhaustive synthesis and critical analysis of literature relevant to the conceptual framework and research question. The literature review includes two sections: (a) an opening narrative section and (b) an application to applied business problem section. The literature review opening narrative contains a brief discussion of the content of the literature review, the organization of the review, an explanation of the strategy for searching the literature, and statistical measures about the literature reviewed. The application to the applied business problem section begins with a restatement of the business problem and with a critical analysis of the conceptual framework and topics relevant to the research question.

### **Literature Review Opening Narrative**

In this study, I explored what social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs in the craft beer industry use to affect brand equity positively. The foundation of this literature review was the relationship marketing theory, the conceptual framework used to guide the exploration of social media consumer brand engagement strategies and the impact of those strategies on brand equity. Consumer brand engagement exists in the dynamic actions and processes between the consumer and the brand (Brodie et al., 2013) that originated within the relationship marketing constructs (Wirtz et al., 2013) of trust, commitment, satisfaction, loyalty, quality, and communication. Social media has become the predominant platform used by organizational leaders to engage consumers (Harrigan & Miles, 2014), displacing traditional engagement strategies due to the dynamic capabilities of the platform. Calli and Clark (2015) stated that social media provides a low-cost means for SME leaders to engage consumers and increase brand equity. A lack of understanding and the inability to maximize the potential afforded by social media to engage consumers may lead to the continued demise of SME influence on the U.S. economy.

The literature reviewed for this study included peer-reviewed and scholarly journal articles, dissertations, seminal works, books, and other published studies. Most of the articles were peer reviewed and published after 2015. More than 60 different peer-reviewed sources supplied the articles in this literature review. The summary table in Appendix A depicts the number of references included in the literature review, the peer-



reviewed quantity, the quantity published between 2015 and 2019, and correlating percentages. Appendix A includes the same summary data for the entire study, in addition to the literature review.

As a strategy for locating articles, I conducted searches on Google Scholar, the Walden University Library, Business Source Complete (EBSCO), Science Direct, and Emerald Insight. I obtained most of the peer-reviewed articles included in this literature review from the Business Source Complete database. The search terms used to find and locate articles were *relationship marketing*, *consumer relationship management*, *consumer relationship marketing*, *social media*, *social media marketing*, *brand*, *brand equity*, *brand loyalty*, *brand image*, *perceived brand quality*, *brand awareness*, *small-to-medium enterprise (SME)*, and *consumer engagement*.

### **Application to the Applied Business Problem**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs in the craft beer industry use to positively affect their brands' equity. Economic and social constraints limit the opportunities for SMEs to successfully increase their brand equity and obtain competitive advantages over LSEs (Calli & Clark, 2015). Social media provide a low-cost opportunity for SME leaders to increase their competitiveness through the establishment of relational exchanges (Yoganathan et al., 2015). Transferring organizational marketing strategies from a transactional basis to a relational basis may enable a firm to focus resources on the value that long-lasting relationships provide. Yoganathan et al. (2015)

established that relationships and long-term bonds increased consumer loyalty and enhanced brand equity. The purpose of this literature review was to gain knowledge and provide an understanding of the topics relevant to the research question posited in this study through critical analysis and synthesis of credible sources.

**Relationship marketing.** Relationship marketing is a dynamic strategy aimed at building valuable long-term relationships with customers. Relationship marketing emphasizes the value in customer retention over customer acquisition, and the benefit long-lasting relationships created over traditional advertising and sales promotions (Kumar, 2014). In traditional marketing, engagement with consumers emphasizes the functional features of products to influence purchase decisions (Cleff, Lin, & Walter, 2014) and is a unilateral exercise (Brown, Crosno, & Tong, 2019).

The relationship marketing theory emerged as researchers began to analyze the dynamic nature of the firm and customer relationship (J. Zhang, Watson, Palmatier, & Dant, 2016). First introduced in 1983, Berry (2008) defined relationship marketing as a firm's strategy to attract, develop, maintain, and enhance customer relationships. Morgan and Hunt (1994) later referred to relationship marketing as the activities that foster successful relational exchanges. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) added that relationship marketing is the involvement and integration of all business partners into the firm's development and marketing strategies. Al-Weshah, Alnsour, Al-Hyari, Alhammad, and Algharabat (2013) emphasized the importance of consistent and continuous contact with customers in maintaining long-term relationships.

The underpinning theories used by researchers to support the relationship marketing theory vary based on industry and application. Morgan and Hunt (1994) argued that the commitment-trust theory supported the creation and growth of successful relationships. Agariya and Singh (2011) stated that the social exchange theory, social penetration theory, attraction theory, and equity theory are the building blocks of establishing and maintaining long-term relationships. Yoganathan et al. (2015) suggested that the social exchange theory assisted in understanding the linkages present in relationship marketing. Despite the multiple supporting theories, researchers reiterated the importance of long-term relationship building between a firm and its customers.

The purpose of the relationship marketing theory is to provide a scientific understanding of the paradigm shift from transactional to relational exchanges in business and marketing (Jones, Ranaweera, Murray, & Bansal, 2018). Gronroos (1996) stated that relationship marketing intends to identify, establish, maintain, and enhance customer relationships through relational exchanges that fulfill the promises made between parties. Consumers enter relational exchanges with firms when the belief is present that the benefits outweigh the costs and the firm provides the consumer with products that meet consumer preferences (Hunt, Arnett, & Madhavaram, 2006). Yoganathan et al. (2015) posited that the establishment of mutually beneficial long-term relationships is the core tenet of relationship marketing. Mutually beneficial relationships result when the customer and brand share common values and goals (Yoganathan et al., 2015) and are

created through dynamic and evolving relational exchanges (Palmatier, Houston, Dant, & Grewal, 2013).

Researchers identified many constructs and factors that influence successful relationships and exchanges (Hunt et al., 2006) resulting from the vast array of definitions and supporting theory. Central to the relationship marketing framework, regardless of definition or underlying theory, are the constructs of trust and commitment (Brown et al., 2019). Agariya and Singh (2011) added to trust and commitment the constructs of satisfaction, communication, and quality as constructs in the relationship building process between the firm and the consumer. Vieira, Winklhofer, and Ennew (2014) suggested that trust, commitment, and satisfaction were first-order constructs in relationship marketing and antecedents of relationship quality. The interactions between the constructs of trust, commitment, satisfaction, and communication are vital to increase firm performance and brand equity (Vieira et al., 2014).

The first construct of relationship marketing is trust. Trust has been the most cited construct in the study of relational exchanges (J. Zhang et al., 2016) with over 167 references in relationship marketing literature studied from 1992 to 2002 (Agariya & Singh, 2011). Trust is key to the development of an enduring and intimate relationship between the consumer and the brand (Sashi, 2012) and is a predictor of firm performance (J. Zhang et al., 2016). Palmatier et al. (2013) suggested that trust acts as a governance mechanism between members in the relational exchange. Trust is a result of the integrity and reliability of one member bringing about confidence in the other member (Morgan &

Hunt, 1994). Trust is the belief that each member of the relationship makes and keeps promises to perform their respective obligations (Vyas & Raitani, 2015). Trust is a result of the consumer's belief in the performance and reliability of a brand against expectations and is a mediator of uncertainty and risk for the consumer (Bianchi, 2015).

Customer commitment is the second construct of relationship marketing. Sashi (2012) suggested that trust is not enough to transform a transactional exchange into a long-term relationship and that customer commitment is a critical construct in the process. Customer commitment refers to the dedication of each member to focus on the value of long-term relationships over a discrete exchange (J. Zhang et al., 2016).

Customer commitment is a result of the self-focused dimensions that occur throughout the relational exchange (J. Zhang et al., 2016). Additionally, Vieira et al. (2014) stated that commitment is a result of the customer's perception of the quality of the relationship.

The third common construct of relationship marketing is satisfaction. Vyas and Raitani (2015) stated that satisfaction is the consumer's subjective evaluation and judgment of the brand. Prior consumer experiences with the brand and the resulting emotions stemming from those experiences drive consumer satisfaction (K. Zhang, Benyoucef, & Zhao, 2016). Vieira et al. (2014) indicated that consumer confidence in the brand further impacts the level of satisfaction. Therefore, each involved party's willingness to establish and share common goals may enhance satisfaction (Vieira et al., 2014).

The communication construct is the fourth common construct of relationship marketing. The communication construct refers to the rate of distribution and quality of information passed between the consumer and the firm (J. Zhang et al., 2016). Effective communication enables firms to leverage consumer information and create products that meet user expectations in a timely and cost-efficient manner (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006). Communication also ensures that the establishment of shared goals, values, and norms occurs between members in the relationship (J. Zhang et al., 2014). Furthermore, communication between the consumer and the brand facilitates the ability to resolve problems and discover future opportunities that are mutually valuable (Palmatier et al., 2006).

The final construct of relationship marketing is relationship quality. Vieira et al. (2014) referred to relationship quality as a higher-order construct derived from the consumer's trust, commitment, and satisfaction with the brand. Relationship quality is the result of the fit of the relationship in fulfilling the wants, needs, and desires of the consumer that ultimately shapes brand perceptions and impressions (Vyas & Raitani, 2015). Relationship quality serves as an antecedent to customer brand loyalty (Petzer & van Tonder, 2019) and the customer's perceived value of the brand (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2019).

Scholarly inquiry into the benefits of relationship marketing yielded both consumer and corporate results (Hunt et al., 2006). Yoganathan et al. (2015) suggested that relationship marketing may enhance brand equity through the creation of consumer

loyalty, which derives from long-term bonds created between the customer and the brand. The benefits for each party vary depending on the strength and nature of the relationship (Hunt et al., 2006). Customer benefits include confidence benefits, social benefits, and special treatment benefits that result from the evolution of the relationship over time (Ruiz-Molina, Gil-Saura, & Moliner-Velazquez, 2015). These customer-focused benefits include assumptions regarding future interactions, endorsements, satisfaction, and loyalty (Vieira et al., 2014). Firm benefits are vast and reach across various business functions. Sheth and Parvatiyar (1995) stated that relationship marketing enhances the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing, resulting in improved productivity. Hunt et al. (2006) concluded that the benefits of relationship marketing include competitive advantages and improved financial performance for the firm. Chia-Jen (2013) stated that the resulting benefits of a successful relationship marketing strategy are the firm's ability to advance the market continuously. Al-alak (2014) noted that additional firm benefits from long-term relationships include increased customer retention, improved customer satisfaction, and higher customer loyalty.

Researchers have also highlighted the drawbacks associated with relationship marketing. From a consumer perspective, relationship marketing strategies are manipulative, intrusive, and harmful (Jones et al., 2014). Jones et al. added that a consumer's preconceived assumptions and attitudes toward relationship marketing significantly impact the likelihood of the consumer entering into a long-term relationship with a company. Agariya and Singh (2011) noted that a high volume of business

executives reported a lack of desired results from relationship marketing initiatives with failure rates ranging from 55% to 75%.

Despite the risks, relationship marketing remains a prominent topic in marketing research. The Internet, social media, and other forms of technology support the continued evolution of relationship marketing (Kumar, 2014) through continuous contact with customers and the ability to overcome geographical boundaries (Al-Weshah et al., 2013). Additionally, technology-driven relationship marketing strategies provide business leaders with the opportunity to remain competitive and impact brand equity (Gurhan-Canli, Hayran, & Sarial-Abi, 2016).

**Customer relationship management.** The establishment of mutually beneficial relationships does not guarantee organizational success. Business leaders should continue to manage and enhance established customer relationships to maximize the benefits. Soltani and Navimipour (2016) stated that CRM was the most effective tool firms use in the relationship building and enhancement process to create value. Soltani and Navimipour additionally noted from their research, a 5% increase in customer retention might increase firm profitability by 50%-80%. Choudhury and Harrigan (2014) added that CRM might also drive increases in market awareness and reduce costs.

CRM is a management strategy that combines the intelligent use of data and technology to acquire customers, develop relationships, and diffuse knowledge to generate customer value (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014) and maximize the customer lifetime value (CLV) (Malthouse, Haenlein, Skiera, Wege, & Zhang, 2013). CRM uses



people, processes, and systems that are internal and external to the organization to ascertain consumer needs, track consumer behavior, and drive consumer satisfaction (Oluseye, Tairat, & Emmanuel, 2014). The incorporation of CRM into organizational relationship marketing strategies may positively impact brand equity.

The origins of customer relationship management date back to the 1960s and the works of management scholars, including Drucker and Levitt (Oluseye et al., 2014). The basis of the modern CRM framework is in the relationship marketing principles introduced by Berry in 1983. Modern definitions of CRM include benefits from the interaction of customers and organizations on social media platforms (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). The definition of CRM is therefore very similar to that of relationship marketing. Agariya and Singh (2011) noted researchers frequently use relationship marketing and customer relationship management interchangeably.

The basic principle of CRM is to focus on the creation of longitudinal relationships between the brand and the consumer (Yoganathan et al., 2015). CRM uses end-to-end consumer information to build and grow mutually beneficial relationships between the firm and the consumer (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). The primary components of traditional CRM are the acquisition, maintenance, and termination of consumers (Malthouse et al., 2013). The focus of CRM is to create customer satisfaction, build consumer loyalty, and increase consumer retention (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). Through CRM, firms focus on transforming customers into firm assets that interact with the brand and add value instead of customers who focus only on discrete transactional

exchanges (Chia-Jen, 2013). CRM fosters the creation of relationships with customers that provide the organization with a greater understanding of consumer needs, facilitates market segmentation, and builds consumer loyalty (Oluseye et al., 2014). The resulting benefits of CRM are the delivery of products based on customer preference (Chia-Jen, 2013).

The traditional objective of the CRM conceptual framework was to maximize the customer lifetime value to the firm from relationship initiation through customer retention to termination (Malthouse et al., 2013). Traditional CRM was flawed by the database technologies and inward facing systems of the 1980s that abandoned the marketing principles that underpinned it (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Traditional CRM used technology to collect, integrate, and analyze customer data before communicating back to the customer (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). The CLV focus of traditional CRM was the discounted sum of all future profits realized from the relationship with a consumer (Malthouse et al., 2013). Traditional CRM and CLV did not consider other valuable contributions the relationship may yield beyond profits.

CRM today includes the management of data surrounding all customer brand touch points with the intention of maximizing customer loyalty and satisfaction (Oluseye et al., 2014). The quality of data retrieved is key to the successful application of CRM systems and has emerged as a primary focus of firms (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). Soltani and Navimipour (2016) divided CRM systems into three categories: operational, analytical, and collaborative. The first category, according to Soltani and Navimipour

(2016), is operational CRM systems designed to increase efficiency through automation. Firm data obtained from the consumer that provide the business leaders with needed information comprise the second category, analytical CRM systems (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). The final category, collaborative CRM systems, business leaders use to manage communication and interaction with the consumer (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016).

Web 2.0, social media, and other nascent technologies are today reinvigorating CRM among business leaders. According to Vieira et al. (2014), customer relationship management and technological advancements are facilitating how firms engage consumers and establish relationships in the electronic era. Electronic customer relationship management (e-CRM) is the utilization of internet based technologies to develop and enhance customer relationships (Lam, Cheung, & Lau, 2013). Lam et al. (2013) stated that business leaders use the Internet to manage relationships, segment and retain customers, and grow consumer value. The use of the Internet additionally adds the opportunity to enhance consumer interaction through individualization (Soltani & Navimipour, 2016). CRM is now a collaborative effort with a network focused approach designed to develop stronger relationships with customers (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014).

Social CRM emerged from E-CRM as the popularity and usage of social media increased among consumers. Social CRM is the engagement of customers through the integration of social media and customer-facing activities that enhance relationships

(Trainor et al., 2014). Social CRM initiatives focus on customer engagement and two-way interactive communications with customers (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). The strategic objective of social CRM includes other valuable outcomes of the relationship such as customer referral value (CRV), customer influence value (CIV), and overall customer value in conjunction with CLV (Malthouse et al., 2013).

**Small-to-medium enterprises.** Small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) are vital to the social and economic development of world economies (Karadag, 2015). In 2014, SMEs accounted for over 95% of all enterprises and 50% of all employment in OECD countries (Karadag, 2015). SMEs assist their local economies by creating jobs, helping with the alleviation of poverty, innovation, and supporting the gross domestic product (Cant & Wild, 2016). In 2012, representatives of the U.S. Small Business Administration classified over 99% of all organizations in the United States as SMEs, accounting for 48.6% of the labor force (Caruso, 2015).

Despite the significance of SMEs, varying definitions exist across economic regions and nations. Berisha and Pula (2015) stated that over 50 ambiguous definitions existed across 75 countries studied. The 1971 Bolton Report defined SMEs from a qualitative perspective utilizing the characteristics of management type, market share, and the independence of the enterprise from a larger parent firm (Berisha & Pula, 2015). Representatives of the World Bank and the European Union mandate that firms have less than a specific number of employees and meet certain financial criteria (Berisha & Pula, 2015). In the United States, the SME definition is dependent upon industry variables

utilizing either employee count or revenue as the criteria (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2016b).

In the United States, SME influence in the market is on the decline. Since 2004, LSEs employment opportunities are increasing year over year while SMEs are steadily declining (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2016a). Calli and Clark (2015) noted that numerous factors, including financial and social constraints, limit the opportunities for SMEs to grow successfully, and may facilitate the all around failure of SMEs. Calli and Clark further identified social media management, information technology, financials, staffing, and the environment as factors limiting SMEs successful implementation of social media.

Cant and Wild (2016) suggested that SME leaders are reluctant to use online marketing tools and instead opt to use traditional media in their marketing strategies (Cant & Wild, 2016) that limits their competitive capabilities and stunts potential growth opportunities. LSEs successful adoption of social media engagement strategies is fostering competitive advantages yielding increases in organizational performance and brand equity (Calli & Clark, 2015). He et al. (2014) stated that social media enables SMEs to compete against LSEs for sales, increase brand reputation, and survive in a competitive global business environment. Social media offers SMEs an opportunity to engage current customers and attract new customers through networking with little to no startup costs (He et al., 2014). He et al. concluded that SME activity on social media increases customer trust and loyalty with the SME.

Social media provides SME leaders with the opportunity to engage consumers and create relationships. He et al. (2014) suggested, in their inquiry, that SME leaders should develop and apply the required marketing strategy to achieve success through social media and consumer engagement. The successful implementation of social media strategies could reduce the growth constraints SMEs face and make them more competitive (Calli & Clark, 2015). SME leaders may realize competitive advantages and increases in brand loyalty, awareness, image, and perceived quality if they adopt and successfully implement social media engagement strategies.

**Social media.** The Internet, Web 2.0, and social media have redefined business activities and consumer behavior (Hew, Lee, Ooi, & Lin, 2016). Social media are a disruptive technology, a technology that unexpectedly displaces an established one, influences the way people think, and changes the way they interact (Billington & Billington, 2012). Social media are the platforms that support the sharing of user-generated content (UGC) and are transforming the marketing communication paradigm from the traditional one-way model (Kohli et al., 2015). Within social media, consumers actively produce, share, and consume content at their discretion (Laroche, Habibi, & Richard, 2013). Social media facilitates the transition of consumers from passive to active participants in marketing communications and value creation for the brand (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014).

Social media are interactive web-based applications and platforms that foster the exchange of user-generated content in real time. Social media facilitate the reach of

communications to diverse audiences, the viral spread of information, and consumer engagement (Argyris & Monu, 2015). Social media include various types of applications such as blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, products/services reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing, and virtual worlds (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

Social media emerged shortly after the introduction of the Internet in 1993, limiting users to establishing profiles and creating friend lists only (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These social media platforms lacked interactive capabilities and dynamic content (Billington & Billington, 2012), making them less attractive to business leaders. Business leaders used social media to advertise and promote to large audiences in a short time (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014). Over the past two decades, social media evolved in direct correlation with the advancements of the Internet.

Social media is the primary source of information sharing and knowledge attainment for consumers (Hudson, Huang, Roth, & Madden, 2016). In 2015, 2.078 billion social media accounts existed, a 29% penetration of the global market (Kim, Chan, & Gupta, 2015). In the United States, more than one-half of online adults, 56%, visited more than two social networking sites daily (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). The most prominent and largest social media site, Facebook, reported over 1.19 billion active monthly users with an 18% growth rate in 2014 (Aichner & Jacob, 2015). Greenwood et al. reported in 2016 that 68% of all U.S. adults used Facebook, 28% used Instagram, 26% used Pinterest, 25% used LinkedIn, and 21% used Twitter. Aichner and

Jacob (2015) stated that nine of the top 20 visited websites were social media websites in January 2014.

The growth and consumer utilization of social media is attracting the attention of business leaders and creating a domain for investments to improve brand equity.

Choudhury and Harrigan (2014) reported that 80% of business leaders consider social media to be an important component of their marketing strategy and a means for maintaining relationships. Social media engagement that is included as part of the firm's branding and marketing strategies facilitates (a) active communication with consumers, (b) the ability to receive feedback from consumers, and (c) enables consumers to communicate with peers about the brand (Watkins, 2014). Social media influences organizational CRM capabilities by enhancing engagement levels with the consumer and improving the value of relationships (Trainor et al., 2014).

The 2010 American Express campaign to promote shopping at small businesses demonstrated the ability of social media to create positive results. The representatives of American Express launched the Small Business Saturday campaign to support local business shopping on the Saturday following Thanksgiving (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). The campaign's promotion strategy predominately used social media and resulted in a 40% awareness amongst the public and a 28% increase in revenues for small business owners (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). By 2013, the initiative had expanded globally, driving \$5.5 billion of sales (Umunna, 2013) and a 74% increase in share price for American Express (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014).



Social media provides significant opportunities for organizations to engage consumers individually (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). As an engagement platform, social media facilitated trust building that is vital to the creation of brand value (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). Social media platforms enable consumers to share experiences that impact their perceived brand quality and image of the brand (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015). Paniagua and Sapena (2014) noted that active users could establish trends and agendas rapidly through social media.

Social media is fast moving, facilitating the opportunity for individuals to form connections and communicate in real time. Social media enables enhanced interactions between consumers that impact the brand offering (Davis, Piven, & Breazeale, 2014). The successful utilization of social media engagement relies upon effective and frequently refreshed communication between the firm and the consumer (He et al., 2014). Argyris and Monu (2015) identified eight means by which social media supports communications between the firm and the consumer.

- Presentability refers to the ability to deliver images and employ advocates in a desirable manner that positively affect the brand.
- Self-expression is the user-generated content shared on social media.
- Monitorability is the ability to witness the outcomes of firm communications.
- Reach is the capacity to expand into new markets previously unattainable by the firm.

- Engagement is the ability to keep consumers informed, maintain relationships, and increase loyalty.
- Connectivity refers to the capacity to enable communication with consumers.
- Recordability is the ability to save communications and data.
- Availability is the transparency of information about the firm.

Consumers primarily use social media to engage other users and to extrapolate or share information (Saboo, Kumar, & Ramani, 2016). Tiago and Verissimo (2014) noted that peer engagement on social media platforms has a more significant persuasive impact on consumer intentions than firm promotions. Kozlenkova, Palmatier, Fang, Xiao, and Huang (2017) suggested that consumers perceive online relationships as equally important and as valuable as offline relationships. The consumer benefits of social media include the ability to obtain richer information, accessibility to a diverse array of products, and competitive pricing through the use of proactive communication (Tiago & Verissimo, 2014).

Effective social media utilization impacts the financial performance, operational performance, and corporate social performance of the firm (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Paniagua and Sapena (2014) stated that financial performance includes metrics such as sales growth, profitability, and stock price. Saboo et al. (2016) noted that a higher willingness-to-pay, loyalty, and brand sales are beneficial results of brand identification through social media. Operational performance ranges from manufacturing efficiencies to product variables including quality (Paniagua & Sapena, 2014). Consumers engage in

various activities within social media that influence product development and firm initiatives that appease consumer wants and needs. Paniagua and Sapena (2014) stated that corporate social performance is how the brand's reputation impacts relationships between the firm and society. Customer comments about the brand made on social media impact corporate social performance.

Successful organizational adoption of social media yields intangible and tangible benefits. Luo, Zhang, and Duan (2013) stated that social media content and metrics were an indicator of brand performance and future business value. Laroche et al. (2013) added that social media might positively impact brand loyalty. Increased revenue, improved returns on investments, and brand awareness were additional benefits of social media (Laddha, Rathi, & Mantri, 2015). However, Kohli et al. (2015) noted that some business leaders did not know how to integrate social media into their marketing strategies successfully. Kohli et al. further added that business and industry leaders did not realize the full potential impact that social media may have on their business.

Social media also comes with many risks for the organization. Paniagua and Sapena (2014) noted that social media had a profound increase in the reputational risk of the firm over traditional marketing platforms. Content delivered through social media spread virally at rates previously unfathomable in traditional marketing (Luo et al., 2013). To mitigate the risk, firms may choose to hide content if there were concerns regarding the accuracy of the information and intent of the user generating the content (Argyris & Monu, 2015). Firms that either ignore or react too late to customer concerns may solicit

discussion on social media about the strength and viability of the firm (Aichner & Jacob, 2015) adversely affecting the brand image and financial performance of the firm (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Tsimonis and Dimitriadis suggested that firms should address negative comments and employ strategies that use negative feedback as a method to communicate with consumers.

**Consumer brand engagement.** Consumer brand engagement is one of the most significant benefits afforded by social media (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Consumer brand engagement existed in the dynamic actions and processes between the consumer and the brand and resulted in value generating interactions (Brodie et al., 2013) that originated within the relationship marketing paradigm (Wirtz et al., 2013). Consumer brand engagement was an extension of customer communications that extended beyond transactional exchanges (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014) to relational exchanges whereby the customer was involved, occupied, and interested with the brand (Braun, Hadwich, & Bruhn, 2017). Engagement centered on firms' abilities to create long-term relationships built on the exchange tenets of trust and commitment (Sashi, 2012). Engaged customers enhanced sellers' understanding of customers' needs, participated in product development, solicited information on strategies and products, and were advocates for the brand (Sashi, 2012).

Consumer engagement was representative of the evolution of consumer involvement in the creation and distribution of information about the brand (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Consumer brand engagement occurred when the interactions between

the consumer and brand enhanced emotive connections (Kabadayi & Price, 2014) and stimulated desired behaviors (Keller, 2013). When the consumer brand engagement was successful, consumers were passionately involved with the brand (Wong & Merrilees, 2015). Engaged consumers provided firms with brand meanings (Brodie et al., 2013), word of mouth messaging (Franzak, Makarem, & Jae, 2014), and increased brand equity (Shabbir, Zhang, Pitsaphol, & Hassan, 2015).

Smith and Gallicano (2015) stated that consumer engagement was a result of each consumer's individual information consumption needs, online experience, content involvement, and social interaction. Consumers engaged brands based on perceived hedonic benefits, integrative social benefits, and cognitive benefits (Verhage, Swen, Feldberg, & Merikivi, 2015) that originated from the functional performance and value of the brand offering (Franzak et al., 2014). Consumer brand-engagement was an investment of consumer resources beyond the initial transaction to acquire the product (Franzak et al., 2014). Through engagement and the formulation of a healthy relationship with a brand, consumers developed part of their self-concept (Popp & Woratschek, 2016) and were more knowledgeable about the brand (Hapsari, Clemes, & Dean, 2015). Engagement maximized consumer competencies and created positive associations between the consumer and the brand (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014) that increased brand loyalty (Leckie et al., 2016), satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Brodie et al., 2013).

Engagement is imperative to the success of the firm's social media strategies (Kabadayi & Price, 2014). Brands collaboratively managed with consumers the social dialogue and information sharing of messages about the brand through engagement (Gambetti, Biraghi, Schultz, & Graffigna, 2016) on social media platforms. Consumers provided information through inquiries into brand offerings, complaints, and active conversations (Park & Kim, 2014). Engaged consumers further provided the firm with valuable information regarding individual needs from and about the brand (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014) and value adding processes (Leckie et al., 2016).

**Brand equity.** The most valuable asset of any organization is the brand (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Brands are the unique organizational assets that provide a competitive advantage and impact firm performance (Shah, 2017). A brand furthermore provides an organization with a means to communicate with consumers, obtain growth opportunities, and create value (Franzak et al., 2014). Yoganathan et al. (2015) added that the brand includes physical characteristics such as design, features, and packaging as well as intangible characteristics including brand name, quality perception, and reputation that foster relationship building with a consumer.

The brand is additionally one of the most identifiable forces in driving consumer behavior (Parker, 2015). Kuvykaite and Piligrimiene (2014) stated that a brand is an offering that provides the consumer with unique advantages over other brands. Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2015) remarked that a brand provided functional, emotional, and self-expressive benefits to the consumer. These benefits shape the consumer's beliefs

and actions towards the brand and create value in the brand (Ramaswamy & Ozcan, 2015).

The market success of the brand is dependent upon the firm's ability to recognize and understand the consumer's impact on brand value, and to manage the role consumers played in brand equity creation (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014). Brand equity was a multifaceted construct created by strengthening the value of the brand (Tajzadeh-Namin & Norouzi, 2014). Firms that successfully increased brand equity obtained competitive advantages that resulted in increased revenues, higher profits, and reduced costs (Yoganathan et al., 2015). Increased brand equity directly impacted a firm's ability to obtain higher prices for product offerings, influenced customers' buying decisions, and improved the effectiveness of marketing communication (Yoganathan et al., 2015).

Brand equity was the market-based intangible asset value derived from the shared experiences of the consumer and the firm (Christodoulides et al., 2015). The financial perspective of brand equity emphasized the economic value the brand represented for the firm (Buil, de Chernatony, & Martinez, 2013) and is a result of consumer-based brand equity (Christodoulides et al., 2015). Nisar and Whitehead (2016) stated that the consumer-based perspective of brand equity attempted to measure consumer's feelings toward the brand. The strength of consumer-based brand equity was in the associations, knowledge, and memory of the consumer (Christodoulides et al., 2015).

A significant amount of research existed on brand equity, yet scholarly definitions and dimensions lacked consensus (Buil et al., 2013). Aaker (1991) defined brand equity

as assets and liabilities that resulted from the value provided to the consumers from a brand, the brand name, or symbol. Aaker proposed that the constructs of brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand associations, and perceived brand quality manifested into brand equity. Keller (1993) stated that brand equity was a result of the response of consumers' knowledge of the brand and the firm's marketing of the brand. Keller asserted that the dimensions of brand awareness and brand image were essential to the brand equity concept.

Scholarly articles frequently referenced the brand equity constructs of consumer loyalty to the brand, image of the brand, perception of the brand's quality, and awareness of the brand. Aaker (1991) stated that brand loyalty was the foundation of brand equity and a strategic asset for the firm. Loyal consumers exhibited positively emotionally biased behavior toward one brand versus a competitive brand (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Brand image is reflective of the consumer's correlation to the meaning behind the consumption of the brand with their identity (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Consumer brand associations directly impact brand image. Positive brand associations lead to a positive brand image which garners competitive advantages that improved market positions (Sasmita & Suki, 2015) and increased brand loyalty (Cho, Fiore, & Russell, 2015). The brand equity dimension of perceived quality was the decisive factor in determining the benefit the user directly associated with the brand (Yoganathan et al., 2015). Severi, Ling, and Nasermodeli (2014) described brand awareness as a stimulating factor in consumer purchase decisions resulting from consumer memories that impacted recollection and



recognition of the brand. Severi et al. concluded that consumer brand awareness might result in choice and consideration advantages over other brands.

Brand loyalty is an important concept and dimension of brand equity that has attracted significant interest from brand owners and scholars. Yoganathan et al. (2015) postulated that brand loyalty, a core dimension of brand equity, is a consumers' positive attitude toward a brand resulting in repeat buying behaviors and favorable associations. Brand owners recognized the financial benefits loyal customers provided to the organization, including repeat purchase behavior while disregarding price and aggressive advertising (Murray & Kline, 2015). Brand owners also recognized that loyal customers were critical in the acquisition of new customers through word-of-mouth communication (Murray & Kline, 2015).

The assessment of brand loyalty frequently intertwines the behavioral and attitudinal dimensions of brand loyalty. The repurchasing of the brand's product offerings and the recommending of the brand to other consumers are the desired results of behavioral loyalty (Zhang, K. et al., 2016). Attitudinal brand loyalty manifested when consumers self-identified with a unique characteristic of the brand (Aaker, 1991). Attitudinal loyalty resulted in a consumer's preferences and commitment to a product or service (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). Brand loyalty, therefore, was dependent upon the on the consumer's experience in consuming the brand and subsequent assessment of the brand (So, King, Sparks, & Wang, 2014).

Brand owners develop and maintain loyal customers through the utilization of multiple sources of customer data and engagement in social media. Loyal and committed customers in online communities shared information about and recommend products and services to other potential consumers (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). Loyal customers became advocates of the brand through word of mouth communication exposing potential new customers to the brand (Bianchi, Drennan, & Proud, 2014).

Brand equity is further enhanced by the consumer's image of the brand. A brand's image is the basis for consumer expectations of the brand (Maehle & Supphellen, 2015). Images are a result of factors that shape a consumer's knowledge, descriptions, memory, and relationship with a brand (Huang & Ku, 2016). Aaker (1991) stated that a brand's image influenced consumer purchasing decisions, provided sense and feeling, and helped consumers in processing information about the brand. Keller (2013) further added that the benefits associated with the brand image included making the brand clear, distinct, and different in the minds of consumers. A consumer's brand image was the mental picture a brand represented, resulting from a developed set of perceptions about the brand (Pich, Armannsdottir, & Dean, 2015). Consumer perceptions result from positive and negative associations in conjunction with developing a consumer's knowledge, feelings, and beliefs about the brand (Huang & Ku, 2016). Cho and Fiore (2015) inferred that the conceptualization of brand image transitioned from a historical focus on cognitive associations to a modern focus on emotional and sensory associations.

Brand associations were the stored information and memories in the consumer's mind that acted as a means of differentiation for the consumer (Sasmita & Suki, 2015) while connecting the consumer to the brand (Tajzadeh-Namin & Norouzi, 2014). Keller (1993) proposed that a brand's image was the result of three distinct and intertwined dimensions of brand associations: functional, experiential, and symbolic. Functional associations included product-related attributes of the brand, such as quality and usage (He & Lai, 2015). Functional benefits included the satisfying of external consumption and problem-solving needs of the consumer (Huang & Ku, 2016). Experiential associations referred to the mental benefits associated with the use of the brand (Maehle & Supphellen, 2015). Product-related and nonproduct related attributes of the brand shaped the consumer's personal feelings (Cho & Fiore, 2015) while appealing to the physical senses (Huang & Ku, 2016). Symbolic associations were representative of the perceived psychological and social benefits for the consumer (Maehle & Supphellen, 2015). The benefits of the symbolic association included improved self-concept and perceived social designation (Maehle & Supphellen, 2015).

Cho et al. (2015) stated that an entire brand image included conjointly cognitive, emotional, and sensory associations derived from intangible and tangible attributes and benefits of the brand. Cognitive associations were the product related attributes of a brand that reflected the consumer's assessments of the brand (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Cognitive associations resulting from past experiences influence consumer behavior towards the brand (Cho et al., 2015). Emotional associations included personal feelings that

contributed to the experiential benefits for the consumer (Cho & Fiore, 2015). The consumer produced emotional associations from perceptions originating from both product and nonproduct related attributes of the brand (Cho & Fiore, 2015). Sensory associations were a result of direct, tangible brand-related experiences that yielded experiential benefits for the consumer (Keller, 1993). Brand experiences occurred in advertising, social media, through word of mouth, websites, and other interactions.

A consumer's brand image aligned with their perception of the quality of the brand (Severi et al., 2014). Sasmita and Suki (2015) stated that a direct correlation existed between consumer's perceived quality of the brand and admiration of the brand. Perceived brand quality was the subjective judgment of the consumer resulting in differentiation among brands (Parker, 2015). Aaker (1991) suggested that perceived brand quality was the overall consumer perception of the luster and quality of brand offerings compared to other brands. Aaker added that perceived brand quality correlated with price premiums, price elasticity, and usage.

A consumer's perceived brand quality referred to the subjective perception of a product's superiority over other brand's product offerings (Vera, 2015). Tangible and intangible product attributes influenced the subjective perceptions of the consumer (Vera, 2015). A consumer's experiences with the brand, including consumption, impacted assessments of quality (Tajzadeh-Namin & Norouzi, 2014) while familiarity with the brand better facilitated the consumer's ability to assess quality (Bianchi et al., 2014). Keller (2013) suggested that other factors of the brand affecting consumer perceptions of

quality include performance, features, conformation, reliability, durability, serviceability, style, and design. Hsiao et al. (2014) added that the variable of the brand name also impacted consumer perceived quality of the brand.

Brands perceived to be of high quality additionally invoked positive associations for the consumer (Dens & de Pelsmacker, 2016) that impacted other brand dimensions and included brand awareness. Brand awareness was a result of memories established through consumer associations with the brand (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). Brand awareness was influential in a consumer's cognizant differentiation of a product (Hsiao et al., 2014) and preference for a brand that drove purchase decisions (Tajzadeh-Namin & Norouzi, 2014).

Barreda et al. (2015) defined brand awareness as the consumer's recognition of the unique qualities and image of a brand. Keller's (1993) definition was similar and further divided awareness into the subcategories of brand recognition and brand recall. Brand recognition was the consumer's ability to discriminate one brand from others while recall was the consumer's ability to recollect from memory the brand with a cue. Barreda et al. (2015) added that the intensity of brand awareness was a result of the ease by which consumers recalled the brand and were prominent in the communication process between the firm and the brand.

According to Keller (2013), brand awareness significantly impacted consumer knowledge, consideration, and selection of a brand over other competitive brand offerings. Switala, Gamrot, Reformat, and Bilinska-Reformat (2018) added that brand

awareness is the consumer's knowledge of the brand and relationship with the brand's product offerings. Brand awareness assisted the consumer in evaluating risk in purchase decisions and in assuring consumer perceptions of brand quality (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). The higher the consumer awareness of the brand, the higher the perceived quality of the brand (Hsiao et al., 2014).

The development of brand equity is a complex process (Couto & Ferreira, 2017). For SMEs, the process is even more challenging due to the limited human and financial resources. However, as suggested by Kennedy and Wright (2016), the brand and branding process is potentially more critical for SMEs than LSEs as a critical means for creating differentiation and competitive advantages. Social media allows SMEs to engage consumers and potentially generate brand equity by creating brand associations, facilitating active communication with the brand, sharing quality stories, and generating awareness. In the crowded adult beverage and craft beer market, the ability to engage consumers and build brand equity may be critical to the vitality of the SME.

### **Transition**

Section 1, the foundation of the study, was an introduction into the principle tenets of this research study. In section 1, I introduced the topic and research problem addressed in this study. I continued with a discussion on the intent of the research before providing a synopsis of the research method and design. The assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that grounded the research followed. Section 1 concluded with an

explanation of the significance of the study and an analysis of the literature supporting the topic and research problem.

In section 2, the project, I provide a detailed summary of the project constructs. Section 2 begins with a restatement of the purpose of this inquiry. A discussion on the role of the researcher, participants, and population follow the purpose statement. Section 2 continues with an in-depth analysis of the research and design methods first introduced in Section 1. Section 2 includes a detailed description of the study ethics in conjunction with the data collection means, methods, and analysis. Section 2 concludes with a discussion on the reliability and validity (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) of the data.

In section 3, application to professional practice and implications for change, I present the findings of the study derived from the data collection instruments presented in Section 2. Section 3 also includes subsections detailing the study applications to professional practice as well as how the study may impact social change. Section 3 concludes with recommendations for future research, a reflection on my study process, and a conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

SMEs are critical to the social and economic development of economies around the world (Karadag, 2015). The acquisition of knowledge about what social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SME use to increase brand equity is significant to the continued vitality of SMEs. This knowledge may assist SME leaders in gaining competitive advantages and achieving success. This section includes a restatement of the purpose of the study, a description of the role of the researcher, and a discussion of the participants. I also describe the research method and design and the means of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data. The final subsections address the reliability and validity of this study.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs in the craft beer industry use to affect their brands' equity positively. The participant population consisted of eight craft brewery business leaders located in the Southeastern United States who had demonstrated experience in developing and deploying strategies that positively affect their brands' equity. The implications for positive social change include the potential to positively affect communities through new employment opportunities, economic stability, and improved living conditions.



### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher when conducting a qualitative study is to provide an understanding of the phenomenon through the lived experiences and events of participants (D. Taylor, Blount, & Bloom, 2017). My role in this qualitative study was to identify the research methods, recruit participants, gather data, analyze the findings, and ensure the validity and reliability of the results. I elected to use a case study design involving two data collection methods to gather data from selected participants and reach saturation: (a) semistructured interviews and (b) observations of social media content.

In this qualitative multiple case study, I was the primary instrument in the data collection process conducting interviews and collecting data from observations of the social media content posted by the SME. According to Fleet, Burton, Reeves, and DasGupta (2016), the researcher is the primary data collection instrument and should immerse him- or herself in the data to provide more robust findings. Galvin (2015) added that qualitative studies with interviews focus on the meaning and interpretation of the data collected. I used a semistructured interview technique and preestablished interview protocol (Appendix B) to collect data from SME leaders regarding the consumer brand engagement strategies they implemented on social media platforms. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. I used NVivo software to code data, identify themes, and ensure saturation.

I followed the principle tenets and guidelines of the Belmont Report. Adashi, Walters, and Menikoff (2018) noted that the Belmont Report specified that research

should be conducted with respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. The Belmont Report also included the guidelines of informed consent, risk assessment, and participant selection (Adashi et al., 2018). Participant confidentiality was respected and maintained throughout the current study. I used the MS Excel RANDOM function to assign five-digit identifiers to participants. The participants of this study were leaders of craft beer firms and were not persons who could be considered unable to provide informed consent without coercion.

I took several steps to eliminate concerns over bias and remove preconceptions when conducting the study. Roulston and Shelton (2015) stated that bias originating from a researcher's subjectivity, feelings, opinions, or preferences are not problematic when identified and managed appropriately. First, no personal relationships existed between myself, the participants, or the chosen industry. Second, I examined through continuous reflection how my assumptions may have influenced the research. Finally, I used the process of bracketing in this study. Sorsa, Kiikkala, and Astedt-Kurki (2015) suggested that bracketing requires qualitative researchers to set aside their preconceptions about the phenomenon and maintain an open mind throughout the research process.

### **Participants**

A qualitative study is an iterative process in which the researcher gradually discovers the problem and sources of information (Knapp, 2017). Sample sizes in qualitative research are typically small, and participants are selected due to their close relationship with the research question (Shelton, Smith, & Mort, 2014). In a case study,

the participant is the most critical source of information (Yin, 2014). The selection criteria for participants in the current study included the following: (a) SME leaders in craft beer industry, (b) located in the Southeastern United States; (c) demonstrated experience in developing and deploying social media consumer engagement strategies that positively affect their brands' equity, and (d) over the age of 18.

Participant selection was a multistep process. I first located potential participants from the directory on the Brewers Association web page using selection criteria based on business classification, state, and county. I also used personal networks and social media to locate participants in this study. I cross-referenced businesses using the Buzzfile database to ensure they met the criteria of a SME per the U.S. Small Business Administration's (2016a) definition. Buzzfile provides businesses' contact information, including the name, address, and phone number of the business and an individual point of contact at the business.

The establishment and maintenance of quality working relationships with study participants are critical in qualitative research (Kelly, Harrison, Schaughency, & Green, 2014). Kelly et al. (2014) added that in the initial stages of research, the establishment of relationships occurs through the identification of key stakeholders, explanation of the mutual benefits of the research, minimization of burden on the stakeholder, and explanation of the expectations of the study. To meet these guidelines, I sent invitation letters to business leaders and identified points of contact that included the purpose of the study and consent form. The consent form provided the business leader with information

regarding the authenticity of the study, the ethical standards adhered to in this study, methods of data collection, and final outputs of the study. I followed up with an e-mail and a phone call based on participant preference to answer any questions, address concerns, and ensure confidentiality.

### **Research Method and Design**

In this study, the purpose was to explore what consumer brand engagement strategies successfully increased brand equity. The design was a qualitative multiple case study of the craft beer industry in the Southeastern United States. I conducted face-to-face interviews with eight SME leaders and reviewed social media content and data published by the SME to answer the research question.

### **Research Method**

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods are the three methodologies used to answer research questions and explore a phenomenon (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). Qualitative and quantitative methods differ in their analytical assumptions and means of exploring the phenomenon (Baskarada, 2014). The mixed-methods approach is a methodological combination of the qualitative and quantitative methods, either concurrently or sequentially, in the same study (Vankatesh et al., 2013). Knapp (2017) suggested qualitative designs and techniques are used to understand how leadership strategies work and impact an organization. A qualitative method was appropriate for exploring strategies SME leaders use to engage consumers and positively impact brand equity.

The primary focus of a researcher is to provide an understanding of a phenomenon and fill a void in existing knowledge (Knapp, 2017). Qualitative research methods facilitate the researcher's exploration of a phenomenon in a natural environment (Shelton et al., 2014) in nonquantifiable descriptive terms (Yilmaz, 2013). Qualitative methods enable a researcher to obtain rich data from participants (Wright, O'Brien, Nimmon, Law, & Mylopoulos, 2016) and advance the understanding of a phenomenon (Hlady-Rispal & Jouison-Laffitte, 2014). Yilmaz (2013) noted that quantitative methods are used to examine a phenomenon through the statistical analysis of numerical data. Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Laffitte (2014) added that the essence of quantitative research is the validation of theory, constructs, or relationships. Researchers who use quantitative methods employ reliable instruments and response categories (Golafshani, 2003). According to Fassinger and Morrow (2013), researchers using a mixed-methods approach include both types of data and choose from multiple methodological designs. Researchers who use mixed methodologies attempt to provide an understanding of a phenomenon through descriptive, numerical, and inferential evidence (Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013). The use of quantitative or mixed methods was not appropriate in the current study because the research question did not necessitate the testing of theory, constructs, or cause-and-effect relationships.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research designs include case study, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology (Campbell, 2015). Crowe et al. (2011) suggested that the case study

design is most applicable when the researcher intends to provide an understanding of *how, what, and why* questions. Researchers employing a narrative inquiry design explore the phenomenon through multiple discussions with the participant (Wang & Geale, 2015). Researchers employing a phenomenological design rely on the descriptions and interpretations of participants to provide an understanding of the phenomenon (Davidsen, 2013). Because this study focused on the exploration of a business problem through participant experiences and perceptions, a qualitative multiple case study design was the most applicable.

Researchers employing a case study design seek to gain a comprehensive understanding of a research problem through deductive and inductive means (Baskarada, 2014). De Massis and Kotlar (2014) added that a case study is a qualitative design that allows for an exhaustive exploration of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context through use of various lenses. Cronin (2014) suggested that a case study researcher takes into consideration the spoken words and perspectives of the study participants as well as the environment and situation in which they occur. A second qualitative design I considered was narrative inquiry. A researcher who uses a narrative inquiry design collects data and seeks to provide an understanding of a phenomenon through the stories of participants (Wang & Geale, 2015). According to Hickson (2015), a researcher using a narrative inquiry design focuses on the context of the stories as well as other elements in the building of the story. Stories from participants would not have adequately addressed the research question of this study; therefore, a narrative inquiry

design was not suitable. The third research design considered was phenomenology. A researcher who employs a phenomenological design focuses solely on the participants' lived experiences, which requires that the researcher separate all known natural assumptions about the phenomenon before engaging in the data collection process (Snelgrove, 2014). A phenomenological approach was not suitable for this study due to the limits of the design in collecting data beyond individuals' lived experiences. In this study, I collected data from interviews and the social media pages of the organizations included in the study.

In considering the research design of this study, I also considered how I would obtain data saturation. Data saturation improves both the validity and quality of the study findings. Data saturation is the process whereby new participants are continually introduced into the study until the data are repetitious, and saturation is reached when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). Elo et al. (2014) posited that data saturation provides assurance and verification that the data collected are comprehensive and complete. In this case study, I obtained data saturation by three means: (a) asking each participant the same interview questions; (b) selecting an adequate sample size, and (c) using multiple data sources.

### **Population and Sampling**

Marshall et al. (2013) stated that sampling is a critical component of credible research. Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter (2014) suggested that challenges exist in defining the initial sample size due to the emergent nature of the information within qualitative

methodology. The sampling process includes defining the sample universe, the sample size, a sampling strategy, and the recruitment of participants (Robinson, 2014).

The sample universe is the target population of the study described by inclusion and exclusion criteria (Robinson, 2014). Inclusion criteria are those characteristics that a participant must possess to qualify for the study. The inclusion criteria for the current study were (a) SME leaders in the craft beer industry, (b) demonstrated experience in developing and deploying social media consumer engagement strategies that positively affect their brands' equity, and (c) over the age of 18. No exclusion criteria existed for this study.

Yin (2014) proposed that the sample size for a case study is different from other qualitative designs. Campbell (2015) added that the sample size for a case study usually contains fewer than 12 participants. In this interview-focused case study, I intended to have a sample that consisted of at least three small business leaders and no more than 12. The final sample in this study was eight participants. A range with a minimum and a maximum number of participants provides flexibility in the research design while facilitating the researcher's ability to obtain quality data and achieve saturation (Cleary et al., 2014; Robinson, 2014). Marshall et al. (2013) stated that saturation occurs when participants replicate previous data and information becomes redundant.

Campbell (2015) stated that the sampling strategy for a case study is purposive. In purposive sampling, the cases meet specified criteria for the study (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena, & Nigam, 2013) whereby each case represents either an individual or a group



that provides the researcher with data needed to understand the phenomenon (Cronin, 2014). I chose individual cases based on their organizational type and size in conjunction with their geographic location. The Brewers Association database classifies craft beer organizations by type and size, which supported this sampling strategy.

The sourcing of participants was the final stage in the sampling process. In qualitative studies, the researcher's resourcefulness is the only limiting factor in obtaining participants (Robinson, 2014). In this study, I used email, phone, and personal visits to firm locations to reach participants. All participants received the study purpose, information regarding the authenticity of the study, the ethical standards adhered to in the study, and means for ensuring confidentiality. Participants additionally received voluntary participation and consent forms in conjunction with the opportunity to ask questions.

### **Ethical Research**

Ethical guidelines ensure that researchers in qualitative and quantitative studies protect participants as well as the personal and sensitive data collected from misuse (Oye, Sorensen, & Glasdam, 2016). S. Taylor and Land (2014) indicated that protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of participants are critical ethical issues a researcher has the responsibility to protect. Incorporating the ethical principles of respect, integrity, and beneficence reduces ethical risks in the research study (Lunnay, Borlagdan, McNaughton, & Ward, 2015). This study adhered to the ethical guidelines and protocols of the Walden

University Institutional Review Board (IRB), approval number 11-15-17-0525882 expiring on November 14, 2018.

Lunnay et al. (2015) emphasized the importance of mutual respect and trust building between the parties in a research study. Lunnay et al. stated that respect begins with the researcher's acknowledgment of the potential harm the study could pose on participants. Irwin (2013) added that trust results from the researcher's duty of care in the data collection and study process with participants. The informed consent process depicted any potential risks this study could have imposed on participants and began the establishment of respect and trust between parties involved. Participants who agreed to participate in this study received a copy of the informed consent form via electronic mail. The form provided the participants with information about the study, the consent to record interviews, and how to withdraw from the study. I obtained verbal consent and acknowledgment before conducting interviews with the participants.

Integrity is a result of the researcher's compliance with ethical standards regardless of situations or scenarios that arise during the study that are outside of the researcher's control (Lunnay et al., 2015). Before each interview, I reminded participants about their anonymity and protection measures through the use of unique coding and that the data collected were to remain confidential, password protected, secured in a locked location, and destroyed after five years. I used the MS Excel RANDOM function to assign five-digit identifiers to participants and maintain participants' anonymity.

I also reminded participants that they have the right to withdraw from participation in the study. Participants could withdraw from participation in this study at any time. Participants could withdraw verbally during the interview process or through written request up to the publication of this study.

Beneficence measures if the benefits of the study are greater than any duress the participants experience during the data collection and study process (Lunnay et al., 2015). I requested participants preferred methods of communication upon initial contact and strictly adhered to communicating with participants through their chosen method. I conducted interviews via the preferred method of the participant. I did not identify any other factors that would create harm or duress for the participants. For their participation, I said I would provide a copy of the results to each interviewee as both an incentive to participate and a token of gratitude.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument in the data collection processes (Yilmaz, 2013). Brooks and Normore (2015) suggested that qualitative research should incorporate multiple data collection instruments such as interviews, observations, and documents to explore the phenomenon in question. Gringeri, Barusch, and Cambron (2013) pointed out that the utilization of multiple sources strengthens the understanding of the research phenomenon. Yilmaz (2013) further added that the use of multiple sources adds to the credibility and rigor of a qualitative research study. In this study, I collected data utilizing two methods. The first

and primary method of data collection was the utilization of semistructured interviews with the individuals responsible for the establishment and implementation of the social media consumer brand engagement strategies in the organization. The second method I used was a document review. I obtained and reviewed documentation from the social media pages of the organization. I focused on the engagement that occurred between the organization and consumers. I concluded the data collection process by asking each participant to engage in member checking.

The interview process followed a semistructured technique utilizing open-ended questions to engage the participant and steer the conversation about the topic. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) stated that in interviews that follow a semistructured technique, a researcher empowers participants by allowing the participant to provide insights into their knowledge about the phenomenon. I conducted the semistructured interviews as outlined in the interview protocol (Appendix B) consisting of an introduction and a series of eight open-ended questions (Appendix C). The open-ended questions (Appendix C) facilitated the discussion with participants on the topics of consumer brand engagement, social media marketing, and brand equity.

As cited in Yilmaz (2013), the quality and credibility of a study are the qualitative measures that directly correlate to trustworthiness. The final measure I employed in the data collection process was member checking. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) defined member checking as the participant's evaluation and feedback of the researcher's interpretations of the data. Fassinger and Morrow added that member checking improves

the quality and trustworthiness of the data. I further improved the credibility of this study by utilizing the three step transcription process recommended by Yin (2014). According to Yilmaz (2013), trustworthy and credible qualitative research occurs when the researcher presents rich and descriptive data obtained from an in-depth inquiry into the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Qualitative case study researchers collect data from multiple sources to provide context-rich data and confirm findings (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkpatrick, & Robertson, 2013). The data collection process in this case study consisted of phone interviews utilizing a semistructured technique in conjunction with document reviews. The benefits of a semistructured interview are the detailed and complex information about the topic (Starr, 2014) that lead to a greater understanding of the research question and increased validity (Doody & Noonan, 2013). Brooks and Normore (2015) suggested that a document review is a systematic process that, according to Boblin et al., (2013), provides information relevant to understanding the research question that was not obtained through the interview process.

I used a semistructured interview technique to conduct the study interviews as a primary means of collecting data from participants and to address the research question of this study. I used open-ended questions to obtain an understanding of the social media strategies implemented by the SME leader and the outcomes of those strategies on brand equity in accordance with the interview protocol. Brooks and Normore (2015) stated that

semistructured interviews enable the researcher to be adaptable in the sequence and delivery of the predetermined interview questions. Fassinger and Morrow (2013) noted that adaptability and flexibility in the interview process facilitate the empowerment of research participants and the sharing of their individually lived perspectives about the topic.

The semistructured interviews began with a reminder of the informed consent and withdrawal processes. I also asked participants for their permission to record the interview. Participants verbally provided consent and had the opportunity to ask any questions before the interview began. The interview questions related to the participant's strategic use of social media to engage consumers and positively impact brand equity. At the conclusion of the recorded interview, I asked participants for a follow-up interview to confirm the results of the interview and conduct member checking.

The second data collection method I implemented was a documentation review. I reviewed the participants' social media pages, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Google+, and Untappd as a secondary data source. Document reviews of the participant's company were aimed at identifying any variances between interview results and real-life occurrences (Shelton et al., 2014) thereby adding credibility and strengthening the quality of the study (Gringeri et al., 2013). I reviewed the content posted on these pages with a focus on the activity and content provided by the firm to engage consumers, interactivity between the firm and consumers, and consumer activity

on firm social media pages during the observation period. I maintained my notes and the data collected on a spreadsheet for coding and theme analysis.

I employed the member checking process to validate the accuracy of my interpretations from the participant interviews. Thomas (2017) expressed that member checking is a process that enhances the validity and credibility of the research. After completion of the initial interviews and transcriptions, I shared with willing participants my initial interpretations. Petrova, Dewing, and Camilleri (2016) stated that through member checking, researchers validate that the study is free of omissions and misrepresentations that would impact the study findings.

### **Data Organization Technique**

A qualitative case study researcher's inquiry and conclusion result from data collected through unique circumstances that are open to various interpretations (Harland, 2014). Yin (2014) believed a researcher should maximize the following four data collection principles to ensure validity and reliability: (a) the use of multiple sources; (b) create a database to organize data; (c) maintain a chain of evidence; and (d) exercise care in the collection of data from electronic sources. Campbell (2015) stated that case study research requires the researcher to employ the cognitive skills of induction, deduction, synthesis, evaluation, and critical thinking throughout the inquiry.

In conjunction with the first principle presented by Yin, I used two data collection instruments, interviews and documentation reviews, during this inquiry. I recorded and transcribed each interview with participants; storing the recordings and transcriptions

electronically on a secure, password-protected, external hard drive. I copied and transferred all data from the social media pages of participants to an MS Word document. I coded all identifiable information collected to protect the anonymity of the participant and firm. All the data I collected I stored on the same hard drive as the interview recordings and transcriptions. After the second and all subsequent interviews, I loaded the transcriptions and collected social media data into NVivo for analysis. Woods, Paulus, Atkins, and Macklin (2016) concluded that the use of NVivo software enables the researcher to organize data, identify themes, and establish nodes; emerging patterns and ideas within the data collected that are otherwise unobtainable manually. NVivo was the primary database I used to organize and maintain the data in keeping with the second principle presented by Yin for data collection. I achieved Yin's third principle by storing all documents, notes, transcriptions, and other electronic evidence collected on a secure, password-protected, external hard drive that will be stored for five years. I stored all printed materials collected within the same safe as the hard drive and am ensuring that the safe remains locked at all times. After five years, I will destroy all the data by erasing and reformatting the hard drive and shredding all printed materials. In accordance with the fourth principle presented by Yin, I only collected data from sites which participants had social media accounts and established a time fencing parameter of one week before and after the interviews with each participant. Placing parameters on the amount of time spent observing and collecting documents from social media pages reduced the potential data collected to reasonable levels and allowed for in-depth analysis.



## **Data Analysis**

In this study, the theoretical propositions introduced by Yin (2014) guided the analysis. Yin (2014) suggested that the theoretical propositions of the case study yield the analytical priorities for the researcher. In this study, the priorities included a focus on social media brand engagement strategies and brand equity. I used methodological triangulation, within-case analysis, and cross-case analysis to analyze the data collected.

The use of multiple sources of data integrates methodological triangulation into this study. Drouin, Stewart, and Van Gorder (2015) stated that methodological triangulation is a proven design tool that integrates multiple sources of data into the study to facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the research question. The data analysis in this study included reviews of the transcriptions from semistructured interviews and document reviews of data collected from the SME social media pages. I conducted a document review of the social media content posted by organizational participants and followers to corroborate the interview data, as suggested by Yin (2014).

Explanation building, within-case analysis, cross-case analysis, and pattern matching are a few of the techniques qualitative researchers use in the analysis process (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). In this qualitative case study, I used both within-case and cross-case analysis techniques. Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, and Casey (2015) stated that within-case analysis facilitates the identification and analyzing of themes in each case. Werder, Helms, and Slinger (2014) suggested using a cross-case analysis technique to discover similarities and differences in the data collected from different cases.

Houghton et al. (2015) believed that quality case study research is reliant upon the researcher's ability to converge sources and provide a clear and explicit understanding of the data collected. I began the data analysis by importing all transcriptions of participant interviews, notes, and documentation from social media pages into NVivo for analysis. Following the review of all documentation and initial analysis within NVivo, I analyzed the findings and coded the results based on emerging themes within NVivo as nodes. Coding is an iterative and incremental process that is an essential part of qualitative analysis (Baskarada, 2014). Data coding facilitated the development of themes that aided in the discovery of conceptual similarities and differences between the data (Baskarada, 2014). Utilizing the nodes, I conducted a cross-case analysis of the data loaded into NVivo. I compared the cross-case analysis results against the within case analysis results before beginning to assemble my interpretations and preliminary findings.

I then conducted a detailed review and evaluation of the findings to ensure the reliability of the analysis and the credibility of the identified themes. I crosschecked my preliminary interpretations and findings with willing participants through member checking. Member checking involved the reviewing and validation of the data and researcher interpretations by participants (Gringeri et al., 2013). Member checking enabled the participants to change the meaning of the data and ensure content validity (Petrova et al., 2016).

The data analysis section concluded with a write up the findings. The write up correlated to the conceptual framework that guided this study as well as the literature

reviewed for this study. I present the write up with considerations of alternative perspectives and in an emerging manner, as recommended by Campbell (2015) later in this study. The conceptual framework for this study was the relationship marketing theory introduced by Berry in 1983. Relationship marketing was a firm's strategy to attract, maintain, and enhance customer relationships (Berry, 2008). I used this theory to guide the inquiry of this study into what strategies SME leaders use to engage consumers on social media and increase brand equity. The themes identified from the analysis of data will add to the current body of knowledge about the ability of SME enterprises to increase brand equity through the creation of mutually beneficial relationships on social media pages.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Anney (2014) stated that qualitative researchers explore a phenomenon through diverse approaches. Kornbluh (2015) added that those approaches include participant experiences and perceptions that, according to Noble and Smith (2015), create a reliable and credible inquiry premised on trustworthiness. Trustworthiness results from the researcher's ability to demonstrate dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability in the data collection and analytical processes (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). I address the dimensions of dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability in conjunction with data saturation in the following subsections.

**Reliability**

Noble and Smith (2015) posited that reliability is the researcher's ability to remove personal bias from the research method and establish uniformity in the analyses, while dependability is the qualitative measure of reliability. Dependability is important because it ensures that the inquiry findings remain consistent throughout repeated trials and various conditions (Elo et al., 2014). Researchers establish dependability by thoroughly documenting the research process (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015) and establishing an audit trail (Anney, 2014). I addressed dependability by maintaining a log in MS Excel detailing times, places, and settings of all research decisions and activities to include contact with participants or other data collection efforts. I also ensured all data collected, digital interview recordings, transcriptions, notes, and other forms of data were readily available for cross-checking and auditing in accordance with the interview protocol (Appendix B).

**Validity**

Validity refers to the accuracy and truthfulness of the representations presented within the study (Kihn & Ihantola, 2015). Vankatesh et al. (2013) added that in qualitative research, validity is the assurance that inquiry findings are defensible when challenged. The qualitative dimensions of credibility, transferability, and confirmability provide proof of validity in my qualitative research.

Anney (2014) argued that credibility was a reference to the level of confidence surrounding the accuracy of the findings as they pertain to the representations of the data

provided by participants. Amankwaa (2016) added that credibility was important because credibility ensures the truthfulness of the findings in a study. Furthermore, Anney (2014) highlighted numerous strategies for establishing credibility in qualitative research such as peer debriefing, triangulation, member checks, negative case analysis, and persistent observation. I ensured credibility by utilizing the strategies of triangulation and member checking in this study. Triangulation involved the use of two or more data methods to obtain overlapping data (Yin, 2013). Member checks referred to the use of participants to verify that findings presented by the researcher accurately represented the participants intended meanings (Kornbluh, 2015).

Triangulation reduced bias through the cross-checking of participant responses (Anney, 2014). Triangulation strategies included data source triangulation, analyst triangulation, theory or perspective triangulation, and methods triangulation (Yin, 2013). Yin added that data source and methods triangulation increased the validity of the study. I incorporated into this study cross-checking and the methods triangulation strategy. I cross-checked the integrity of participant interviews by observing and collecting data on participant engagement activities and actions on social media platforms.

Member checking was the primary instrument I used to increase the trustworthiness of this study. According to Kornbluh (2015), member checking involved the solicitation of participants to validate interpretations and ensure that the findings were not reflective of the researcher's bias and interests. Kornbluh further added how the use of member checking enables a researcher to gather additional insights into the

phenomenon studied, address any gaps in information, and obtain a more robust understanding of the data collected. Anney (2014) stated that member checking additionally adds to the credibility of the study by ensuring that the findings are from reasonable interpretations of the participants' views. I solicited each interviewee to participate in the member checking process.

The procurement of participant support in conducting member checking was a primary focus of mine after each interview in accordance with the interview protocol (Appendix B). I asked participants to clarify any areas of concern and provide additional information if gaps existed. Finally, participants validated that the results presented were true and accurate reflections of their intended meanings.

Transferability refers to the ability of the researcher to demonstrate that the inquiry findings are relevant in other situations (Amankwaa, 2016). Transferability is important because it ensures the fittingness and relevance of the research (El Hussein, Jakubec, & Osuji, 2015) for future use. Anney (2014) stated that transferability is a conclusion made by the user and not the researcher. The researcher is, however, responsible for providing detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, inquiry methods, processes, and all other aspects of the study (Amankwaa, 2016) to facilitate the user's assessment of transferability. I ensured transferability by meticulously adhering to the data collection and analysis techniques of the research design, maintaining detailed journals and records from interviews in accordance with the interview protocol, and

reaching data saturation. I also included rich and thick descriptions of the participants and sampling methods to support the transferability of the study further.

Confirmability refers to the ability of other users of the study to confirm the findings of the study (Anney, 2014). Confirmability is important because confirmability references the degree to which the study findings resulted from participant's perspectives and not researcher bias (Amankwaa, 2016). Confirmability infers that the researcher did not create the data and findings but that they were an accurate representation of the participant's perceptions (Elo et al., 2014). Audit trails provide evidence to support the inquiry process and findings while triangulation validates the integrity of the data (Anney, 2014) and the confirmability of the study. I ensured confirmability by maintaining robust records and details of data collected for auditing, and through triangulation methods.

Data saturation is important in the establishment of a good qualitative research study. Data saturation is the point when the researcher no longer obtained new data or new themes (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation is the assurance and verification that the data collection was comprehensive and complete (Elo et al., 2014), and directly impacts the validity of the research (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Data saturation further improves the quality of the research through each collection effort until the point of saturation and diminishes afterward (Marshall et al., 2013). To achieve data saturation in this study, I asked each participant the same interview questions as recommended by Fusch and Ness (2015). I also continued to add participants to this study until I was able

to obtain data saturation. Finally, as suggested by Fusch and Ness (2015), I incorporated multiple methods of data collection to achieve data saturation.

### **Transition and Summary**

In Section 2, I presented details about the roles and responsibilities of the researcher, participant sampling, research methods, analytical processes, and the ethical standards of this study. This section included an in-depth analysis of the research method, qualitative, and design, case study, which expanded upon the discussion presented in the *Nature of the Study* subsection in Section 1. Section 2 continued with a presentation of the interview and observation data collection instruments I used in this study. NVivo software was used to assist in the analysis of the data collected through interviews and observations of the social media pages of the participants. This section concluded with a detailed conversation surrounding the strategies employed to ensure the reliability and validity of the inquiry.

In Section 3, the application for professional practice and implications for social change, I present the findings of the study. The results presented in section 3 result from the data collection instruments presented in Section 2. Section 3 includes the recommendation for action and future use of the findings before concluding with a final message to the reader about the significance of this study.



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

Section 3 begins with an introduction that includes the purpose of this study, a restatement of the research question, and an overview of the project. I then present the results of the project. Discussions of the implications for social change, recommendations for action, and recommendations for further research follow. This section concludes with reflections on this study and a conclusion.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs use to positively affect their brands' equity. The data came from interviews with SME leaders and social media pages of eight craft breweries. The research participants were leaders of small businesses and were responsible for social media consumer engagement strategies for their organization. The participants discussed numerous strategies and techniques used to engage consumers and impact brand awareness, brand loyalty, and brand image. My review of the social media content posted by each organization confirmed the data collected during the interviews and provided further insights into the social media consumer brand engagement strategies of the SME leaders in this study. From these two sources of data, I was able to draw conclusions and answer the research question.

#### **Presentation of the Findings**

The primary research question that guided this study was the following: What social media engagement strategies do SME leaders use to positively affect their brands'

equity? I used a qualitative method and case study design to answer the research question. I sought information from business leaders of craft breweries to provide relevant data for this study. I identified common themes from the information collected during semistructured interviews with the participants. I employed the interview protocol in Appendix B and a member checking process to mitigate personal bias, and I implemented triangulation to increase the validity and reliability of the study.

As depicted in Table 1, three themes emerged from the data analysis. These themes emerged after I used a combination of manual coding and Nvivo to analyze the data. The themes depict the merits for social media marketing use and the social media consumer engagement strategies small business leaders need to promote to positively impact the brand equity of their craft breweries. The themes were the following: (a) economical strategy, (b) relationship strategy, and (c) constant and continuous contact strategy. The themes confirmed the constructs and findings presented in the literature.

Table 1

*Emergent Themes*

Nodes/themes	Number of respondents	Number of times theme was addressed
Economical strategy	6	10
Relationship strategy	7	13
Constant and continuous contract strategy	5	12

### **Theme 1: Economical Strategy**

The first theme that emerged from participants was that social media affords SMEs the opportunity to engage consumers and impact their brands more than any other platform. The business leaders who participated in this study do not have the resources available to engage consumers and compete against LSEs on more costly traditional marketing platforms. The cost of entry into most social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is minimal. The consumer reach, engagement capabilities, and benefits are limitless. Participants responded by stating that social media afforded them the best opportunity to engage consumers and positively impact their brand without consuming valuable financial resources. For instance, M152 stated, “I understand the marketing power of social media through both engagement and advertising. Social media works to our advantage of being a small independent business.”

At a relatively low cost, social media enabled the leaders of the SME enterprises participating in this study to reach and engage consumers they otherwise would not have been able to through traditional means. For instance, C149 stated, “We are such a small brewery with a very limited budget so we cannot really afford to do a lot of the newspapers, radio ads, or some of the beer magazines that cost so much more money.” G174 added, “Typical traditional marketing strategies like print and media are not available to us due to price, so we mostly use social media platforms to communicate with consumers.” Participant J159 stated, “Social media is our primary medium for advertising. It seems to be the most effective, and of course cost friendly as well.”

Finally, in keeping with the notion that social media is the best engagement and marketing platform, S167 stated,

I do not feel as though you can have a healthy business without social media. For a company in its first 1-5 years, I do not see how anybody could make it. You need that association with social media and people.

Y123 added, “Rather than take out an ad in a newspaper, radio, or something similar, it makes more sense to do something as easy as a social media post.”

**Correlation to the literature.** Data collected from participants showed that social media is the best marketing solution for their SME compared to traditional marketing strategies. Taneja and Toombs (2014) noted that SMEs use social media rather than other traditional marketing platforms due to social media’s inexpensive nature, expediency, and reach. My findings also aligned with those from Calli and Clark (2015) who observed that social media is the most economical and effective means for SME leaders to engage consumers and compete in a global market. He et al. (2014) suggested that social media offer SMEs an opportunity to increase customer trust and loyalty with the brand at little to no cost. Furthermore, SME leaders do not need to have advanced technical knowledge to overcome the restrictions of their limited resources and deliver simple and effective marketing strategies (Atanassova & Clark, 2015) controlled by the business (Taneja & Toombs, 2014) through social media.

Seventy-five percent of the participants in the current study mentioned social media as their preferred platform for engaging consumers predominantly due to the cost-

benefit ratio. SMEs that employ successful social media marketing strategies may build competitive advantages over industry competitors resulting in increased organizational performance and brand equity (Calli & Clark, 2015). I concluded that the literature and participants' responses confirmed that social media marketing platforms afford SME leaders the most economical and effective means to engage consumers and positively impact brand equity.

**Correlation to the conceptual framework.** Business leaders using social media to engage consumers should ensure that the exchanges are mutually beneficial and move away from transactional exchanges in favor of relational exchanges. Lam et al. (2013) stated that business leaders used the Internet to manage relationships, segment and retain customers, and grow consumer value, which are fundamental principles of CRM. Additionally, technology-driven relationship marketing strategies provide business leaders with the opportunity to remain competitive and impact brand equity (Gurhan-Canli et al., 2016) through continuous contact with customers and the ability to overcome geographical boundaries (Al-Weshah et al., 2013). The relationship marketing strategy and the principles of customer relationship management support the SME leader's use of social media as a primary means of customer engagement.

## **Theme 2: Relationship Strategy**

Most participants in the current study mentioned that their social media marketing and consumer engagement strategies focused on shared values with their target demographic. Participants said that they use social media to acquire customers, develop

relationships, and diffuse knowledge. Participants noted that the education of consumers about their brand had been a focal point of their marketing strategy; establishing and maintaining relationships with their local and regional community members was paramount to their success. Participant social media posts focused on maintaining the desired brand image and consumer perception of their brand. For instance, J159 stated,

I use a very personalized way of marketing. I really keep it personal, hometown, small business owner, oriented. I think that appeals to not only our local residents but our tourists that have come in and out and looked us up on Facebook and Instagram.

C149 added,

We focus a lot on our local community. We focus entirely on an experience. We wanted to be a place where people could come with their friends or family, sit around a table, nurse a beer, and not feel rushed to leave like you might at a restaurant. We work really hard to maintain that. We encourage that with all of our social media posts the best we can.

N133 concluded,

Our social presence was built around remaining local. We think that our product and our approach fits in with the laid-back vibe here in the city. We want to make sure that people get a sense of what we are going for through the stories and the pictures that we put out on social media.

In keeping with the relationship building strategy, R119 added,

We feel the best way to connect is to create an emotional connection. First of all, prompt the consumer to have an interest in something that is along the lines of what they consider their lifestyle or the lifestyle that they would want.

G174 provided the following information, “It is important to be responsive to consumer posts, messages, and questions. You have to be engaged to really understand what is exciting and what is going to be effective with consumers.” M152 added, “Social media is a very powerful tool, but it takes a special kind of mind and thought process to utilize it successfully. You need to find ways to engage your customer base and grow new customers.” S167 provided the following: “Across the board the bottom line is, if you are going to do anything you have to stick with simple but loud. Let people become comfortable with the brand. Be relatable.”

**Correlation to the literature.** Data supplied from participants demonstrated the need to create relationships with consumers. The participant responses emphasized the importance of creating relationships built on brand associations. Yoganathan et al. (2015) suggested that social media allows SMEs to engage consumers and create mutually beneficial relationships built on shared values and goals. Social media enables SME leaders to create simple, efficient, and easy-to-understand associations with the consumer (Atanassova & Clark, 2015). Sasmita and Suki (2015) argued that positive brand associations garner competitive advantages that improve the market position for the brand.

Seven out of eight participants in the current study mentioned strategies developed around relationship constructs in their responses. Strategies that incorporate building relationships with consumers may result in increased customer retention, improved customer satisfaction, and higher customer loyalty (Al-Alak, 2014). I concluded from the literature reviewed and data collected from participants that SMEs should develop mutually beneficial relationships with consumers to positively impact brand equity.

**Correlation to the conceptual framework.** Consumer brand engagement occurs when the interactions between the consumer and brand enhance emotive connections (Kabadayi & Price, 2014) and stimulate desired behaviors (Keller, 2013). Sashi (2012) suggested that engaged customers enhance sellers' understanding of customers' needs, participate in product development, solicit information on strategies and products, and are advocates for the brand. Through this understanding of consumer needs and the sharing of shared values and goals, long-term and mutually beneficial relationships evolve that may result in increased loyalty and enhance brand equity (Yoganathan et al., 2015). The relationship marketing theory assists in explaining how a business can foster and build relationships that positively impact their brand equity.



### **Theme 3: Constant and Continuous Contact Strategy**

The third theme that emerged was the need for SME leaders to remain relevant and in front of consumers given the highly crowded and competitive market space. In 75% of the interviews, participants detailed the need to continuously post content on social media platforms and across multiple platforms. Through consistent posting and contact, the brands remain on top of the consumer's social media pages and at the forefront of the consumer minds. Participants suggested that any post is better than no post at all.

Participant strategies varied in the frequency of contact with consumers. Half of the participants supported posting daily, and sometimes multiple times per day, while the other half supported posting often enough to remain relevant in the consumer's mind. Regardless of the frequency, all participants stated that their engagement strategies relied on constant and continuous contact with consumers. Participants noted that as a business leader creating constant traffic that incites consumers is a driver of their brand success. Participant J159 stated, "We post daily. We try to do a daily post. On weekends specifically, I tell people how the weather is, a nice day or rainy day, to stay in front of customers." M152 added, "Consistency is the key. The ability to post at least once a day is what drives success." Participant Y123's comments further supported the relevance strategy: "You lose people's attention pretty quickly unless it is right in their face all the time. I try to put something up every day or even every other day to stay relevant." Participant C149 noted,

We focus on events. We do events almost every week. We are a tasting room experience, so we do not do distribution and you have to come to us to get our product. In order to do that, it requires a lot of word of mouth or people seeing you online.

Participants further emphasized the need to post across multiple channels. Participant channels included Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Untappd primarily, with participation in other channels being minimal. Business leaders tie their use of each channel to specific audiences and brand messages. To maximize the brand's consumer reach, various channels need to be explored and exploited. Participant M152 stated, "Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook are all tied together. That gives us the ability to create one post on Instagram and hit the other two at the same time.

J159 added, "We use Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Untappd. Our biggest pushes are on Facebook and Instagram without question. Untappd, we leave up to our customers. Twitter is an afterthought since it is automatically fed from Facebook."

G174 provided the following,

We experimented with Tumblr and Pinterest. In the past, we also used video streaming platforms such as Periscope to do short films and events. As our social media people come and go we tend to change those extra activities. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest remain though.

**Correlation to the literature.** Participants in this study suggested that only maintaining a presence on social media is not a viable strategy. Participants noted that

they must continuously post fresh and new content on social media platforms to remain relevant to the consumer. Al-Weshah et al. (2013).) reiterated the importance of consistent and continuous contact in creating and maintaining effective relationships with consumers. Watkins (2014) further suggested that business leaders need to actively communicate with consumers on social media platforms to have a successful social media marketing strategy. Through continuous engagement with consumers, SME leaders are able to establish relationships and create positive associations between the consumer and the brand (Kuvykaite & Piligrimiene, 2014) that directly impact the brand equity constructs of loyalty, satisfaction, commitment, and trust (Brodie et al., 2013; Leckie et al., 2016). Based on the findings from the literature reviewed and participant responses, I concluded that constant and continuous contact with consumers through multiple social media marketing platforms is essential to the success of the SMEs' brand.

**Correlation to the conceptual framework.** Communication is vital to any relationship including those between a brand and a consumer. The fundamental principles of the relationship marketing theory are the value of customer retention over customer acquisition and the benefit of long lasting mutually beneficial relationships (Kumar, 2014). Agariya and Singh (2011) highlighted communication as a core construct in the relationship building process between the firm and the consumer. Vieira et al. (2014) emphasized that constant and continuous communication between the parties in a relationship facilitates trust building and the quality of the relationship. Vieira et al. added that the interaction between trust and communication are vital to increase firm

performance and brand equity. Through social media, business leaders can employ RM initiatives that focus on customer engagement and two-way interactive communications (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Accordingly, the RM theory helps to explain the importance of communication in creating relationships with consumers that strengthen the brand and vitality of the SME in competitive markets.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

This study contributes to the body of knowledge for SME leader's adoption of consumer brand engagement strategies that positively impact their brand equity. Craft brewers, industry professionals, and SME owners could benefit from the results of this study by furthering their knowledge and understanding of social media consumer engagement strategies that positively impact brand equity. Kavisekera and Abeysekera (2016) posited that it is critical for organizational leaders in the modern business era to maximize the benefits of social media and improve their social media marketing strategies. Social media allows business leaders to engage consumers and develop relationships that positively impact their brand (Jones, Borgman, & Ulusoy, 2015).

The specific business problem is that some leaders of small-medium enterprises (SMEs) lack the social media consumer brand engagement strategies to affect their brands' equity positively. This study includes a review of the literature on relationship marketing, social media, and brand equity, followed by a case study. The emergent themes provide small-to-medium business leaders with information for supporting the use of social media to establish relationships through consumer engagement and increased

brand awareness, loyalty, image, and perceptions of quality. Jones et al. (2015) emphasized the need for leaders of SMEs to engage consumers and establish relationships through social media to increase brand equity. Business leaders that either ignore or fail to adapt successful relationship marketing strategies through social media may struggle to thrive and compete in the modern business era (Rasul, 2018).

Participants in this study discussed their social media marketing strategies to engage consumers and increase brand equity. Participants demonstrated their influence in the social media and consumer engagement strategy development and implementation for their craft breweries. Business leaders in this study appeared to prefer social media platforms compared to traditional marketing platforms due to the low or no cost nature of social media, the ability to control content more easily, customer reach, and ease of communication with customers. Participants disclosed that social media has significantly impacted their brand. Huang, Yang, and Lee (2017) stated that successful social media consumer engagement strategies enable leaders of SMEs to advance their brands and compete against global organizations.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include the potential to positively affect communities through new employment opportunities, increased revenues, economic stability, and improved living conditions. SMEs are a vital component to the economic stability of a community. Furthermore, SMEs ability to increase brand equity may provide the needed resources within the community to reduce poverty (Ribeiro-

Soriano, 2017). The findings of the study may also provide consumers with improved information and content that may assist them in understanding and shaping organizational offerings towards the needs of the community.

### **Recommendations for Action**

In this qualitative case study, I explored the strategies SME leaders of craft breweries use to engage consumers on social media and positively impact their brand equity. This study was needed because SMEs are the primary drivers of economic growth in local communities (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017) and yet their influence on employment and economic growth is on the decline (SBA, 2016a). The recommendations from this research may aid SME leaders, community stakeholders, and future researchers who study social media and or brand equity. Business leaders could examine the results of this study and consider incorporating the themes that emerged into their consumer engagement social media strategies. I identified three themes that may help SME leaders positively impact brand equity.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In this qualitative case study, I explored the strategies some SME leaders of craft breweries use to engage consumers on social media and positively impact brand equity. Recommendations for further research include addressing the limitations of this study to include location, sample population, and individual participation criteria. I used eight SME leaders of craft breweries located in the Southeastern United States. The findings of

this study call for further exploration and validation across other regions and markets to ascertain the level of transferability.

A significant limitation to this study was the lack of comprehensiveness in regards to the region of participants and the type of business explored. SMEs are vital to the economic growth of communities of all sizes, states, and nations. Future researchers could expand the geographical area to explore whether or not the same themes would emerge. A future researcher could attempt to validate the findings of this study by choosing to explore a different market that provides economic benefits within their community.

### **Reflections**

The Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program at Walden University has been a longer than anticipated journey that has provided many highs and lows. I encountered obstacles in both my personal and professional lives that hindered my ability to dedicate time to my scholarly goals. From a scholarly perspective, I also encountered self-inflicted obstacles that directly impacted progress. Along the way, I had the opportunity to learn under and alongside knowledgeable faculty and classmates who helped guide me to towards completion of this study. Every interaction provided focus on the task at hand and helped focus and orientate me on the goal.

As I began the process of exploring strategies some SME business leaders of craft breweries use to engage consumers on social media and positively impact brand equity, I quickly learned how challenging the research process was going to be. I found that

conducting a qualitative case study was filled with challenges I had yet to experience in my educational process. The primary challenges stemmed around obtaining and interviewing enough participants to provide a valid and reliable study. I was able to secure two participants very quickly but struggled after that for a significant amount of time to secure any more. I emailed, called, sent letters, went to business locations, and even messaged potential participants through social media with no success. After some time, I established persons of influence and personal points of contact to help secure additional participants. Once I obtained enough willing participants, the second challenge came to fruition attempting to secure interviews.

I enjoyed the opportunity to meet with each participant, hear their strategies, and analyze the data. During the interview process and after that, I set aside any preconceived notions and bias I had about why they should use social media, platforms, and strategies as I attempted to embrace the research process fully. I now have a more holistic understanding of SMEs and SME leaders strategic use of social media for the outcomes they intend to achieve as it pertains to brand equity. My experiences and lessons learned in this process will carry forward and help me in my personal and professional life.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what social media consumer brand engagement strategies leaders of SMEs in the craft beer industry use to positively affect their brands' equity. The targeted population for this study was a minimum of three registered members of the Brewers Association in the Southeastern



United States who have demonstrated experience in developing and deploying strategies that positively affect their brands' equity. I used the relationship marketing theory as the conceptual framework to help guide this study. To ensure the reliability of this study, I thoroughly documented the research process. I established validity by employing the strategies of triangulation and member checking in this study.

Despite the limitations of this study, the results contribute to the literature on SME use of social media to engage consumers and increase brand equity. To obtain the data used in this study, I reviewed sources of information, including journal articles and books, conducted semistructured interviews, and participant social media pages. From the analysis of those sources, three themes emerged, which includes (a) economics, (b) relationship strategy, and (c) constant and continuous contact strategy.

The presentation of the findings linked each emergent theme back to the literature reviewed and conceptual framework that guided this study. The predominant theme that emerged was the need to establish a relationship with consumers. Participants emphasized that their relationship strategy focuses on targeted engagement with consumers that share like values and goals as the SME business leaders. The SME business leaders in this study focused on delivering quality products that met their consumer base needs and wants. Such consumers can associate with the brand and the image that the brand portrays, thereby positively impacting the equity for the brand.

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## Appendix A: Reference Counts and Percentages

Table A1

*Reference Counts and Percentages*

	No.of references	References published 2015-2019	Peer reviewed	Percentage published 2015 - 2019	Percentage peer reviewed
Literature Review	107	80	91	75%	85%
Entire Document	179	135	153	75%	85%

## Appendix B: Interview Protocol

### **Introduction**

Good morning (afternoon). Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this interview is to explore what social media consumer brand engagement strategies you have implemented and the impact of those strategies on your brands' equity. In addition to this interview, I will collect and analyze content from your social media pages during this study.

### **Tape Recorder Instructions**

With your permission, I will be tape recording this interview. The purpose of the recording is to ensure that I capture all the details of the conversation while remaining attentive. I will transcribe the recording at a later date. I will not include any personally identifiable information, identifiable information about your organization, or other sensitive organizational information in any part of the study. The recorded interview, transcripts, notes, and any additional information you provide will remain confidential and secured for five years. After that time, I will destroy all recordings, transcriptions, and other forms of data collected.

### **Consent Form Instructions**

I additionally need you to please read and sign this consent form. This document states that all information collected will remain confidential as outlined above. The consent form reiterates that your participation in this study is voluntary and that you may

withdraw at any time. Finally, the consent form contains information about the ethical guidelines governing this study.

### **Interview Instructions**

Again, thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study. As agreed upon, this interview will last no more than 2 hours. I will now begin recording.

### **Interview Questions**

1. What social media platform do you use to engage consumers and positively affect your brands' equity?
2. What consumer brand strategies have you implemented on each social media site to positively affect your brands' equity?
3. How did you address the barriers to implementing your social media consumer brand strategies for positively affecting your brands' equity?
4. How do you measure your social media consumer brand engagement strategies effectiveness?
5. What strategies do you employ to affect your brand's image on social media platforms positively?
6. What strategies have you implemented to affect brand quality issues on social media platforms?
7. How have you used social media platforms to increase customer loyalty?

8. What other information regarding your consumer brand engagement strategies through social media would you like to share?

### **Conclusion**

I want to thank you for your time today and your help in completing this study. I will transcribe the interview, compile my notes, and analyze the results. After completing my analysis, I would like to ask for your assistance in reviewing my interpretations. This step in the process, referred to as member checking, is critical to the trustworthiness of the study. The additional insights, information, and details you provide will make sure the information presented in the study findings accurately reflects your experiences and perceptions. Will you participate in the member checking process?

Do you have any final comments on this interview, the study process as a whole, or other questions you would like to ask?

Thank you. I will contact you in the next week to schedule a time to review my interpretations of the data collected. In the meantime, if you have any comments or questions, please feel free to email me.



## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What social media platform do you use to engage consumers and positively affect your brands' equity?
2. What consumer brand strategies have you implemented on each social media site to positively affect your brands' equity?
3. How did you address the barriers to implementing your social media consumer brand strategies for positively affecting your brands' equity?
4. How do you measure your social media consumer brand engagement strategies effectiveness?
5. What strategies do you employ to affect your brand's image on social media platforms positively?
6. What strategies have you implemented to affect brand quality issues on social media platforms?
7. How have you used social media platforms to increase customer loyalty?
8. What other information regarding your consumer brand engagement strategies through social media would you like to share?