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Development Strategies for Privately Owned Fashion Boutiques

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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2020

Abstract

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MS, Walden University, 2013

BS, Liberty University, 2010

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Many privately owned brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques in the United States fail to succeed beyond the first 5 years of business. The knowledge of the factors responsible for the decline in the survival rate of traditional or brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques may be essential to these entrepreneurs' survival. Grounded in the general systems theory, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to negate the threat of online retailers. Data were collected through interviews with 5 brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners, who operated businesses in the southeast region of the United States for more than 5 years, denoting success in fashion retailing. Secondary sources of data included secondoary data from the U. S. Small Business Administration, U. S. Census Bureau, and fashion industry reports. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: the importance of marketing, fashion trends, and customer preference.. The outcomes of positive social change will expectedly result from the contribution to strategic knowledge generated from the study, in the formulation of innovative retail business strategies. The potential knowledge utilization of the study results may serve to increase the success rates of online fashion startups and positively influence improvement in the economic status and welfare of fashion business professionals in the community.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to first and foremost to my heavenly Father because through Him all things are possible, I am grateful for His many blessings on this journey. To my daughter: always follow your dreams no matter how long the duration of the process. I also want to dedicate this journey to my parents, who have always been supportive in my life.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Traditional small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in retail are facing a severe obsolescence and survivability threat since the advent and the burgeoning growth of online retailers. Chiou, Chou, and Shen (2017) stated that a customer's shopping decision is often predicated by convenience options, which could be a determining factor in shopping over the Internet or in a brick-and-mortar store. Online fashion retail is rapidly growing and an emerging trend is posing a significant challenge to brick-and-mortar fashion stores. Luo and Sun (2016) noted that with the emerging trend of brick-and-mortar retailers entering the new brick-and-click era, small business retailers could face new opportunities and challenges. Li, Jiang, and Wu (2014) stated that building customer trust is more important for online fashion retailers than in traditional stores and boutiques because of the high perceived risk when purchasing over the Internet. Current limited and sparse knowledge and information on Internet fashion retailing creates an opportunity to understand how business leaders in the traditional fashion boutique industry can develop strategies to offset the threat of online retailers. This limited knowledge predicated the purpose and rationale of this research study, where the aim was to study the strategic imperatives for traditional fashion retailers to contend with the threat posed by Internet fashion retailing

Background of the Problem

Entrepreneurs provide services in a specified geographical location to consumers. The state of South Carolina had 71,201 small firms in 201l in the retail trade industry (SBA, 2014). SME owners have helped to create jobs and contribute to decreasing poverty levels in the state, which has helped improve the lives of the citizens there. Over the years, free enterprise has changed, and business owners have implemented strategies to remain profitable, sustainable, and competitive. Oguonu (2015) stated that effective entrepreneurship demands the decision-making functions of preparation, establishing, guiding, and supervising carefully. The focus of small business owners should be to remain sustainable and retain consumers; therefore, firms could be committed to making the necessary changes to keep clients happy. Entrepreneurial risk-taking is considered multifaceted (Baker, 2015). Some entrepreneurs have remained sustainable and continued to surpass the first critical 5-year threshold of business operations when most are vulnerable. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the strategies that fashion boutique owners use to negate the threat of online retailers. Shanthi and Kannaiah (2015) stated that people tend to shop online due to convenience and accessibility, which is conducive for customers to make purchases around the clock. The disadvantage of brick-and-mortar stores is having fixed hours, whereas online retailers usually operate on a 24/7 basis.

Problem Statement

The traditional brick-and-mortar fashion industry has failed to implement strategies to counter the lowered customer traffic arising from online convenience options (Li, Lu, & Talebian, 2015). An estimated 40% of Americans shop online weekly and monthly, with different frequencies, and online sales continue to increase, from $287 billion in 2014 to a projected $523 billion in 2020 (Kundu, 2018). The consequences of the online shopping trend have manifested in traditional retail store closures of 278 million square feet in the southeast United States between 2015 and 2016 (Cavan, 2016). The general business problem is that there is a high failure rate in traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutique strategies to negate the threat of online retailers.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to negate the threat of online retailers. The case study population was small business owners and managers of traditional privately owned fashion boutiques, who have operated a retail business profitably for at least 5 years in the southeast United States. From the population, a purposive sample included five fashion boutique owners who have demonstrated strategies to negate the threat of online retailers. The positive social change ramifications from the study could include contributing to fostering employment, thereby potentially improving the quality of lives of fashion boutique business owners, employees, and families of the southeast United States.

Nature of the Study

The research involved undertaking a qualitative study. Yin (2017) stated that qualitative studies are suitable for gathering context-intensive and rich data through direct contact with participants in their natural environments. Qualitative research served in fulfilling the objectives of this study in preference to other methodological alternatives because this approach facilitated gaining deeper insights from study participants regarding the online purchase phenomenon in the fashion industry. Murshed and Zhang (2016) noted that the quantitative approach is numerically oriented, requires precise measurements of constructs, and often involves statistical analyses to test prespecified hypotheses. Quantitative research was not considered suitable for this study because numerical data do not provide human insights into understanding a business problem. Mixed-method research was also not suited for the study because of the inherent length and potential complexities associated with using the combination of two research methods. The process of using mixed-methods research is challenging because it involves negotiating the complexities of two different methodologies and the ensuing qualitative and quantitative analysis of data (Tunarosa & Glynn, 2017).

The study involved a multiple case study design, as the aim was to study fashion retailers and peruse other sources of credible triangulation of data to achieve holistic analysis. A case study design is appropriate to use when conducting research and provides methodological flexibility through the incorporation of different paradigm positions, study designs, and methods (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). Qualitative designs such as phenomenology, ethnography, or grounded theory were not suitable for this study. Kaivo- Oja (2017) noted that the phenomenological approach is concerned with individuals' lived experiences. Phenomenology would not be appropriate for this study because the goal was to gain insight into business strategies employed by successful fashion retailers and triangulate the data against credible secondary sources. Simpson, Slutskaya, Hughes, and Simpson (2014) stated that ethnography entails immersion in a group or culture. An ethnographic design was not applicable because the aim of this research did not involve immersion in a group or culture. Flenady, Dwyer, and Applegarth (2017) noted that grounded theory involves studying a problem and developing a theory, which was not the aim of this study; the focus was on exploring contemporary business reality, and not focusing on expanding theoretical knowledge.

Research Question

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to negate the threat of online retailers?

Interview Questions

These interview questions were used to fulfill the research objectives of this qualitative multiple case study:

1. How do you monitor retail trends and formulate customer-oriented sales strategies against online retailers?
2. What strategies do you utilize to retain customers and attract new consumers from online competition and other offline retail stores?
3. How has the fashion industry changed and how were those changes managed?
4. How do you manage changing seasons with fashion and new trends from online retailers?
5. How do traditional fashion retailers compete with online retailers who do not hold large inventories?
6. What are some strategies you implement to gain a competitive advantage over online retailers?
7. How do you track the success of strategies you incorporate?
8. What strategies and imperatives for traditional fashion retailers to compete successfully with online retailers have we not discussed?

Conceptual Framework

The general systems theory (GST) framed by Bertalanffy (1968) was the conceptual framework for this study. Bertalanffy stated that the GST may explain some special systems and decision theory. Business owners could use the GST as a valuable point of reference because the overall operation of a business is a combination of different functions and systems—such as logistics, marketing, and research and development— that must work together collaboratively, adaptively, and synergistically. Bertalanffy (1968) distinguished between open and closed systems, which are either interacting with or isolated from their environment (p. 39). The GST served in gaining a deeper understanding of challenges traditional retailers face in contending with current and emerging trends in online retailing and customer behavior.

The GST was used in a study conducted by Mishra, Kumar, and Garg (2013) and aided in gaining a deeper understanding of the imperatives in the functioning of different elements of the supply chain, in respect of just-in-time (JIT) competencies. Mania-Singer (2017) found value in using the GST, by applying its principles to formulate feedback mechanisms in improving the larger system overall, with current and future improvements to each component of the system. The GST helped in understanding how independent elements of retail operation should function synergistically to overcome threats of online retailing. The fundamental premises of this theory—of adaptability and decision optimization—underpinned this study and helped gain a deeper understanding of the findings using the lenses of these perspectives.

Operational Definitions

The definition of the following terms may be helpful to the reader, specifically as they relate to traditional privately owned fashion boutiques.

Fast fashion: Products produced for a faster turnaround based on customer needs (Ren, Chan, & Ram, 2017).

Innovation activity: When a business creates new ideas to help foster future projects to boost sales (Labitzke, Svoboda, & Schultz, 2014).

Online retailers: Sellers of merchandise using Internet-based platforms and options (Jin-lou & Shuang, 2017).

Small business networking: Businesses of limited size who collaborate with one another and exchange ideas to remain sustainable in a specific geographical location of operations (Chiesi, 2014).

Assumptions

Assumptions are facts that are assumed to be correct although not confirmed. An assumption can be taking something lightly and not valuing the information (Schoenung & Dikova, 2016) until the data is verified. The first assumption in this study was the expectation of enthusiastic feedback from participants. Engaging participants in transcript reviews and member checking may contribute to increasing the trustworthiness and reliability of the data collected from the audio recorded interviews. The second assumption was the expectation that participants would provide truthful answers throughout the semistructured interviews. The third assumption was that within the study, there would be pertinent and quality information provided by the participants.

Delimitations

Delimitations represent the boundaries of the study, which are also referred to as the predicted restrictions in understanding the results of a study (Sampson et al., 2014). Delimitations could help in having some control over the study boundaries. The first delimitation of this study was the geographical location of the southeast United States, where the data were collected. The second delimitation was the restriction to the study population. The targeted population of the study fell under the small business definition of fewer than 500 employees, as defined by the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA, 2014).

Limitations

Limitations are constraints that a researcher may encounter when studying a particular topic. Limitations are the boundaries beyond the researcher's control (Sampson et al., 2014). A limitation of the study was scheduling time to conduct the interviews that did not interfere with time off from continuing business operations. A second limitation was the time constraints the participants were under when completing the assigned preliminary interview or additional follow-up interviews, which could have prevented eliciting all possible pertinent information to the study.

Significance of the Study

The research study data and findings may be of significance to traditional fashion boutique owners to formulate suitable strategies to negate the threat of online retailers and thereby increase profitability and sustainability. The study results may also contribute to the existing body of fashion business knowledge and benefit current and future retail fashion business owners. Specifically, the study findings may be of value to brick-and-mortar fashion businesses in the southeast United States. The study findings may contribute to positive social change by increasing the knowledge and ability of fashion businesses and employees to help improve social conditions in the area. Business profitability can positively influence job creation and the standard of living of communities in the southeast United States.

Contribution to Business Practice

The study findings could be of significance to small business owners by possibly yielding strategies privately owned fashion boutique owners in the southeast United States implement to ensure business sustainability. The study findings may hold positive implications for the business practices of fashion boutiques, notably in contributing knowledge to achieving profitability and sustainability to negate the threat of online retailers and in overcoming the challenges typically encountered during the first 5 years of business.

Implications for Social Change

The study findings may contribute to positive social change by providing knowledge to increase the success rates of startups and thereby improve the welfare of the community. The economic success of traditional brick-and-mortar fashion retailers would likely lead to job creation in the southeast United States. The findings from the research may bring forth new knowledge and unique insights from successful fashion boutique owners.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The purpose of this qualitative research study with a multiple case design was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to counter the threat posed by online retailers. The overarching question for the study is: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to negate online retailers? The purpose of a professional and academic literature review is to summarize, compare, and contrast numerous sources related to the research topic. Hosseini, Chileshe, Zuo, and Baroudi (2015) stated that integrative literature reviews are an effective method of conducting rigorous studies in academia, and the inference drawn is that this critique and analysis helped the researcher in acquiring in-depth knowledge on the research topic under study. Literature reviews provide a breadth of knowledge for a researcher to show the depth of the research. An extensive body of literature reviewed for this study also likely served to enhance the legitimacy of the data analysis. For this study, the literature review included peer-reviewed articles primarily sourced from the business and management database of Walden University Online Library. The databases I used to locate peer-reviewed full-text articles published since 2015 included ProQuest, Emerald Management Journals, ScienceDirect, Sage Premier, Business Source Complete, Google Scholar, and government databases. Most of the articles were sourced from peer-reviewed journals published from 2015 and beyond. The literature review includes critical analysis and critique of scholarly journal articles dated within 5 years. Table 1 contains a synopsis of sources researched to complete this literature review indicating there were 114 total sources, of which 93.9% were peer-reviewed articles. Over 90.4%

were peer-reviewed articles published within 5 years. The peer-reviewed sources included journal articles.

Table 1

Synopsis of Sources Researched in Literature Review

Title	-5 years	+5 years	Total	Percentage
Books	0	6	6	5.3%
Peer-reviewed	103	4	107	93.9%
Government	0	1	1	0.9%
Total	103	11	114	
Percentage of peer-reviewed		90.4%		

Literature Search Strategy

The keywords and phrases used in the database searches included general systems theory, small businesses, business strategies, entrepreneurship, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), small business networking, online retailing (e-commerce), and technology. A literature review for this doctoral study included a critical analysis of a vast body of scholarly journal articles. The analysis and synthesis are the understanding and explanation of relevant literature and may portray an in-depth understanding of the extent of the problem, notably about the challenges in a competitive marketplace for privately owned fashion boutiques.

General Systems Theory

The GST, developed by Bertalanffy in 1968, served as the conceptual framework for this study. The GST is crucial for this study, as the theoretical propositions can explain some special systems and the decision theory, in reference to how organizations function (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The knowledge of the GST could help small business owners acquire a deeper and more beneficial understanding of how a company operates like a system, perhaps valuable in formulating suitable strategies for growth and sustainability. Simola (2018) noted that the presence of exclusive components in various systems could have an impact on other systems. The operations of businesses could potentially become unmaintainable without a grasp of how organizations operate as systems, which could hinder a firm from becoming profitable. Systems have numerous parts and may become complex when interacting with one another (Rousseau, 2017). Small business owners could use the GST as a valuable point of reference because the overall operation of a business is a combination of different functions—such as logistics, marketing, and research and development—working together collaboratively and synergistically. Teece (2018) stated that when components collaborate with other elements in a system, products are produced in a repetitive cycle. Thus, firms could benefit when systems are working together and theoretical lenses help in a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. The application of the GST is therefore potentially valuable in gaining insight into the challenges traditional fashion boutique owners face in negotiating the disruption and upheaval caused by online retailers' influences. A theoretical lens can also aid in a deeper analysis of collected data from interviews with fashion boutique owners and the strategies gleaned from their insights and perspectives.

Small business owners have various innovations that are often appealing to implement; however, entrepreneurs sometimes fail to understand the complexity of the entire system and drawing on theory may present an option to understand this better. Entrepreneurs need an open mind about the different aspects of how one organization works as a system. An organization is comprised of different parts, or departments and functions, that must interact with each other to optimize firm operations (Chikere & Nwoka, 2015). Small business owners may overcome complexity in an organization by implementing complex strategies. The GST has indicated that complex adaptive and balancing mechanisms may aid an organization in negotiating the challenges imposed by internal and external environments (Wang, Han, & Yang, 2015). Once policies are implemented, small business owners could start breaking down a complex system into smaller tasks and from there, engage in the development, formulation, and execution of successful strategies with the application of theory to practice. Entrepreneurs could alleviate complex systems by implementing strategies in the organization. Open systems may simplify complex processes in business operations through adaptiveness and agility (Sweetman & Conboy, 2018). Entrepreneurs could simplify complex systems by implementing appropriate adaptive strategies in the organization and enhance survivability in an uncertain environment beset by constant change. Giudici, Reinmoeller, and Ravasi (2018) suggested that the open systems theory can serve to increase the competencies of organizational members. Using the lens of the systems theory, adaptability was explored in discerning strategies traditional retailers have used to contend with Internet fashion retailing. Small businesses may have to duplicate the cycle of improvement on a continuous basis to help the enterprise remain sustainable. Ceric (2015) posited that a system is created in a business and its continuance is often determined by relations with other systems within the organization. The adaptive aspects of systems theory could help to understand the motivations behind traditional fashion retailers' strategies. Small business owners set the foundation for how an organization operates in a system. There are different subdivisions in a group, and each branch works as a system. The basic concept of autopoiesis is that systems self-produce to interact with other components in a system (Turpin, 2017). Businesses often operate in a repetitive cycle, to produce products or services for consumers. The strategic organizational management approach of breaking tasks into smaller tasks appears logical as complex systems are often problematic to comprehend, anticipate, and simulate. Adaptation and simulation sometimes aid in formulating strategies to render complex systems less debilitating (Bekebrede, Lo, & Lukosch, 2015). The applications of the postulations of the systems theory could potentially help business owners to operate complex systems and remain sustainable.

The findings of Bekebrede, Lo, and Lukosch (2015) could contribute to the strategic knowledge of privately owned fashion boutique owners on various factors involved in the business industry and may provide an understanding of a complex system for entrepreneurs to decipher and then leverage. Small business owners, who contribute may encounter a complex system and could find alternative ways to lessen the problems and return to normalcy. Success in the face of complex systems may entail adaptation, which invariably involves collaborative partnerships within the firm, rather than individuals acting in isolation (Pype, Mertens, Helewaut, & Krystallidou, 2018). The views of Pype et al. may be of significance as holds recommendations on the strategies to implement when delivering different services to clients**.** The GST formally presented by Bertalanffy (1968), initially proposed in the context of biology and explained the organizational relationship of parts to the entire body and coordination function, akin to that of vertebrate and intelligent biological entities (Ravenek, Skarakis-Doyle, Spaulding, Jenkins, & Doyle, 2013), nevertheless has relevance to business as well, which are considered akin to living creatures. Bertalanffy noted that organizations and humans interact with the surrounding environment continuously, and success is predicated by adaptive qualities, which may also be learned and acquired. Consumers have some control over the development of new and existing products, and a business that considers consumer inputs, is likely to achieve greater success than when a customer wants, needs, and wishes would fail to be recognized.

The GST could contribute to organizational success, notably when individuals acquire a good understanding of how a system must operate in a repetitious cycle of constant change. In one study, depicting the application of the GST, unit managers were chosen because of routine contact within the unit environment in operationalizing service policies (Zabeen, Tsourtos, Campion, & Lawn, 2015). The collaboration among the unit managers and the unit environment operated as a system to accomplish one common goal. Zabeen et al. (2015) observed that a detailed examination of organizational developments when used to expand business performance, is often conducive to implementing change management and earning the buy-in of individuals and groups within the enterprise. A holistic analysis of the organizational process as espoused under the theory of the GST could help provide valuable information to small business owners on strategic imperatives and serve in the interpretation of data in this study. The successful strategies of a firm often demonstrably manifest in the adaptation of open systems, which may be made possible by collaborative teamwork (Caws, 2015), and failure with a lack of synergy within. Bertalanffy originally postulated the GST which paved the way for future scholar-practitioners to continue to apply it to various business projects and other settings.

The GST was relevant and significant to the study in furthering the understanding of business and strategic imperatives, notably, valid for small business owners in the fashion boutique industry and heading operations of significantly small size; rather than larger corporations, where there are various departments. Logan (2015) observed that each component may have an impact on the other elements within a system instead of only individualized components. The postulations of the GST may offer simple, yet pertinent concepts that aid in understanding the strategic essentials and imperatives of organizational functioning (Alter, 2015). The following are important constructs underlying the GST.

Living Systems Theory

Járos (2000) noted that the living systems theory, considered to be a subcategory of the GST in regards to the universe as an *actual* system composed of the order of levels of different kinds of smaller structures. The possible implications from the preceding view is that a company should already have that solid foundation laid for growth and sustainability, with the informed decision making, which would facilitate the overall functioning of operations on different levels. Small business owners conduct various tasks to keep the company sustainable, in which each task executed in conjunction with one another may serve to complete a system. Per the connotations of this theory, living systems are often self-organizing, multifaceted open systems that preserve themselves and interact with one another. (Swanson, 2005). The disadvantage for entrepreneurs when trying to complete several duties is that an individual often does not have a specific department to handle and resolve pertinent management and business issues. Larger firms have different departments to handle an issue and a specific problem. Small business owners do not have the luxury to hire more employees; therefore, individuals must handle all challenges that may arise within the company.

The living systems theory when used in a study conducted by Skyttner (1997), where the main value lay in the creation of knowledge and the overall system, led to a deeper understanding of the imperative necessity for enhancing the detection of critical factors influencing system efficiency. Sandler and Tsitolovsky (2017) stated living systems respond to harm as if it is taking an undesirable feeling. Small business owners adapt to make changes within the firm to remain profitable and retain customers. Living systems are closed systems that need special attention (Villalobos & Ward, 2015), where different operations in a business may need careful handling to complete the task.

The findings from the study of Mitchell and Sackney (2016) could provide understanding to managers that schools operate within a system as well, which would help show managers that other entities work within a system as well. As business owners, one must adapt to the environment around and be able to operate strategically to remain sustainable in a continuous, evolving business world. Living systems often can derive energy from the surrounding environment (Elaiw, Alghamdi, & Bellomo, 2017), and the symbiotic association of the relationship between internal and external entities often helps in overcoming the challenges encountered in contending with survivability.

The interpretation of the living systems theory in a business context is astute management strategies can facilitate adaptation to stressors in the environment, expediently and with less discomfort and damage to the business (Huber, 2015). The principle of the living organization thus applies to businesses, in that the endeavor must be constantly adapt and survive in a competitively charged marketplace**.** Small business owners could benefit from the living systems theory because operating a company requires energy and one must maintain a systematic flow to continue to flourish. Grzybowski and Huck (2016) cited that living systems are self-motivated and require continuous flows of energy. The same principles hold true for businesses, as leaders and owners of for-profit entities must understand that different operations within the company require energy to produce products to consumers. The managers of business should constantly conduct day-to-day operations on a regular basis to stay afloat in the constantly changing business world and must be willing to make the necessary changes to become and stay profitable. Living systems are exposed, out-of-equilibrium thermodynamic objects that work in conjunction with one another, suggestive of a repetitive cycle, with the different parts and components working synergistically in a system (Chatterjee, Georgiev, & Iannacchione, 2017).

The operations within a business rotate and operative in a circular pattern, Kravchenko (2016) noted that by maintaining its uninterrupted continuity in systems, requires interactions and adaption with the continually altering atmosphere to achieve sustainability. Large corporations may have individuals in a specific department to handle issues about a certain product; however, small business owners must combat all issues and still try to maintain profitability in everyday operations. Ham (2015) suggested that to successfully progress over time, living systems should be sustained by flows of matter, energy, and information, which is true of business as well. The understanding from the work of Ham and others is that day-to-day operations conducted by business owners require energy, matter, and information to remain sustainable and compete with other small businesses within a specified geographical location.

Cybernetics

Wiener (1948) coined the cybernetics construct of the GST. Cybernetics is deemed suitable to increase understanding of the dynamic energy flows between systems and organizational components (Schwaninger, 2015). Small business deals with dynamic systems on a regular basis (i.e., purchasing, networking, and decision- making), which each component work dependent on making the firm operate on a more profitable scale. Cybernetics is the study of structures and methods that networked with one another and formed themselves from within a system (Kauffman, 2016).

The prominent aspects of cybernetics are that each component correlates with the other, with a system (Anjaria & Mishra, 2017), which could help understand the functioning and imperatives in systems and the energy and complexities involved and at play within a business. Before a system can work smoothly, managers need to make sure that there is adequate communication and all parties involved are on the same page.

When there is a lack of communication within an organization, the entire system will start to fail, and then things become complexed. The process of systemic inquiry using the cybernetic methodology could aid in understanding the fundamental nature of management problems within a business (Yu, 2016). The understanding of the cybernetic methodology is small business owners may be faced with administration problems and other entities.

Analyzing the view of Krivý (2018) may be significant to small business owners, as the suggestion is that the new cybernetics proponents noted that there is no outside to these systems. Krivý suggested that systems are ecological and evolutionary trajectories, which could be inherently open and unpredictable. Small business owners hence must understand that all components within a company play a crucial role in making sure that the process in the machine and humans work in conjunction with one another. Cybernetic systems and the transformation are often categorized by the addition of one or more goals or reference values, which guides the effort carried out by the system (DeYoung, 2015).

Holmes (2017) suggested that the cybernetic philosophy implies a reduction in the moral ambivalence of the situation, wherein it is incumbent upon the involved human entity or manager to make informed choices and decisions. Cybernetics can be deemed a comprehensive theory, arguably, with relevance to organizational functioning, by denoting how instructions are developed and sustained (Gadinger & Peters, 2016) within a firm, to potentially increase business growth and sustainability. The cybernetics theory could provide insight to small business owners on having some order when conducted business with other companies and being able to maintain a professional relationship with firms as well. Swann & Husted (2017) stated that when applied to social sciences and inquiries of association, scholars have recognized the knowledge of self-regulation with more openly political accounts for being self-organized. The understanding is that companies can self-regulate to continue, continuously improve operations, and provide products within a community.

Small business owners are stretched thin when trying to manage various tasks with minimum employees; unlike the larger companies that have employees in different departments to handle specific issues that may arise. Cybernetics examined the procedures of calculation in machines, animals, human beings, and civilizations (Arbib, 2018). The implication is that a system acts when something interacts within the cycle of operations within a company. Cybernetics is a discipline that is linked to a goal and appropriate adaption and strategies necessary for its achievement (Karimova, 2015). One significant aid that entrepreneurs could receive is constant feedback from consumers, which may be of value to gauge and ensure customer satisfaction and could help meet the goal of the business in becoming profitable.

Social Systems Theory

One of the key contributions of Luhmann’s (1995) systems theory lies in the rationale and explanation for the self-sufficiency of purposeful subsystems, notably in respect of the ability to maintain and renew itself by regulating its composition and conserving its boundaries. From a human dynamic perspective, Luhmann’s contribution in the form of the social systems theory lies in the connotation, that contemporary society often evolves into an independent social system, presumably by autopoiesis and selfrenewal (Sandberg, 2016). Large corporations have an advantage over small businesses because there may be multiple departments within the organization, which have been tasked to handle certain problems in the firm. Unlike, small business owners, who may have a disadvantage because one would have to be the problem solver and continue to manage the company with one or a few individuals. The findings of Golob and Makarović (2017) may provide insight into the challenges of operationalizing the rather complex and abstract postulations enshrined in Luhmann's theory. The views of these researchers include essential, and often inevitable simplification in overcoming the challenges of operationalizing theoretical propositions, possible by limiting the scope to the two key functional subsystems of economy and politics.

Social systems may often fail to reduce difficulty when individuals disregard important aspects of the complexities in organizational functioning (Valentinov, 2015) instead of striving to simplify and break down into smaller pieces. Small business owners must balance various duties within the company, which could sometimes become complex to break down into smaller tasks. Clark and Zhang (2017) noted that social systems are often construed as representing evocative communication, and not perceived as links of human or operational actors. Gerim (2017) suggested that the value of the systems theory may lie in understanding intra-organizational workings. The operations of business work interchangeably with each other to reach one common goal, which is to provide products to consumers and remain sustainable.

Through internal efficiencies and strategic adaptation by the business, with interaction with the environment, development and growth may be more likely possible

(Burns & DeVillé, 2017). Small business owners may have to conduct strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis sometimes to help recognize various entities that may pose a threat to the geographical location. When individuals as part of a system intuitively recognize a common social worldview, it confers confidence (Volini, 2017) and business owners could utilize the experience to implement the theoretical postulations advanced by proponents of the systems theory, to become profitable. Owners could benefit from the internal process, where new ventures provide sustainability for entrepreneurs.

Schlippe and Frank (2013), suggested that users of the systems theory frequently aim at understanding the connections between the subsystems, and among the system and settings, as well as the ensuing dynamics resulting from these relations. When operating a business, the day-to-day operations could provide a systematic approach to help facilitate interaction with all the subsystems. A system can, therefore, be conducive for what Luhmann called “structural coupling” with additional structures so that forthcoming situations can be made more successfully (Rodger, 2013) for leaders operating a company. Business owners must understand that systems may work with one another to help the process and the on-going interactions could help the firm flourish.

Small Businesses

The SBA has characterized a small business as having less than 500 employees (SBA, 2014). Small business owners provide services or products in a specific geographical location. Small businesses create jobs and contribute to the local community (Woods, Olson, Stark, & Stotler, 2018). Each country may have a different number of requirements for employees to be considered a small business. Westrenius and Barnes (2015), noted that while the Australian Bureau of Statistics defined a small business as operating with less than 20 employees, the US Small Business Administration classifies a small business as having fewer than 500 employees. Small business owners and psychological ownership are used interchangeably because the company belongs to the owner. Psychological ownership is the state where an individual feel like something belongs to them (Chatterjee & Shukla, 2018), but belongs to an organization. Entrepreneurs should continuously strive to improve the organization and create a sense of ownership for all within the firm. Small businesses are the “bread and butter” of the economy, and progressive companies could contribute to the growth of the economy. Decisions made by senior management often have bearing and consequence on employees, and gathering feedback from employees is critical of important decisions and actions.

The purpose of the study conducted by Nekhili, Chakroun, and Chtioui (2018) was to explore the lead roles by women in the family and nonfamily leadership positions and job performance. The methodology used was a multiple case study, in which the researchers focused on how females in a co-partnership business took the leadership role and maintained to become successful business owners. Female entrepreneurs balanced two lifestyles: leadership roles in the house and business, which paved the way for females to have leadership positions. The findings from this study could provide insights to other firms by adding the character and images that females can be in a leadership capacity within any organization. Both parties brought critical skills to the business; the female partner of a copreneurial brought a more entrepreneurial approach and motivation. Smith (2000) noted that copreneurs defined in the study as wedded or single couples, equally own and manage a business with less than 20 employees. Each country may have a different number of requirements for employees to be considered a small business. Westrenius and Barnes (2015), noted that the Australian Bureau of Statistics defined a small business as operating with less than 20 employees, while the US Small Business Administration classifying a small business as having fewer than 500 employees.

The worldwide increase of local and international mergers and acquisitions (M&A), both within similar industries and through the implementation of multi-industry modification policies, has put many businesses to fight with logistic individuality (De Bernardis & Giustiniano, 2015). Small businesses may encounter difficulties when merging with other entities and become one organization, in which the merger may cause confusion within each company. When the merger and acquisition occur, the two entities involved may change the business name and operate under one firm. Some small businesses may eventually become a multimillion-dollar company, while some firms remain a small business on a lower scale. When a firm becomes established, the management team would have to start making an ethical decision to help the organization become competitive with other businesses.

Entrepreneurs make decisions on a regular basis, which could have a huge impact on the operation of the organization. De Sousa, Porto, Marcantonio, Takenouchi, and Yu (2015) identified four main factors influencing the decision-making process (i.e. problem, objective, alternative, and consequences. Senior management in a business could benefit from the knowledge and results of a study conducted by De Sousa et al. (2015) on planned or unplanned decision-making process to remain sustainable on a domestic and global level. Researchers have shown that when companies invest in research and development, the economy could grow within that region (Tsvakirai, Liebenberg, & Kirsten, 2018). Management could utilize alternatives to market and remain competitive on a small business scale.

Small businesses may become vulnerable to scammers or individuals trying to create fraud against the firm. Fraud is a dark side of the business, one that many people prefer not to think about much, if at all. Free and Murphy (2015), noted that employee misconduct and errant behavior often may commence with minor events, which may escalate bigger, especially when the subordinate feels that no one is conscious of the impropriety. A small business typically will not have adequate resources to endure a loss arising from unethical and inappropriate employee conduct (Kramer, 2015). Entrepreneurs may benefit from a competitive advantage when there is a strategic business plan in place, which can provide insight for small business owners on how to implement strategies within a firm. Leadership starts with the entrepreneur, which can determine how successful organizations prosper. Executive leaders must be able to handle not only the personnel but also the fallouts (Ali & Ivanov, 2015) to remain sustainable in a global market.

Business Strategies

Knowledge management and the inter-organizational model, often favored by business practitioners and strategists, comprises of four innovative performance essentials: systematic innovation, innovation process management, resource integration, and marketplace performance (Tsai, 2016) that business owners could use during the innovation phase of a product. Senior management should be willing to make the necessary changes to remain sustainable and retain consumers. Business strategies could help a company and subordinates be on the same page and solidify the mission and vision of the firm. Many business owners incorporate adaptive strategies, to also include plans to manage potential threats arising from a change in the internal and external environment, which could have an impact on how operations are conducted (Saxena, Sharma, Rachuri, & Joshi, 2015). Change management is very important for business development, especially in the early stages of business growth and development (Pucher, Candel, Boot, Raak, & Vries, 2015). Collaboration helps organizations implement new ideas and innovate products to provide to consumers.

Kaleka and Morgan (2017) stated that competitive advantage is often conferred and acquired by a positional dominance to attract consumers from other companies on the products that one previously provides to purchase. Companies could benefit from the findings of Kaleka and Morgan on the imperatives in achieving competitive advantage over rivals as organizations strive to attract and retain customers. Some business owners may have to revamp business plans, which other entrepreneurs may implement new business strategies to stay afloat in a competitive market. If a firm would like to have momentum, it may be crucial to integrate concepts of urgency, solidarity, intensity, and accumulation. There are four types of business strategies that Maniora (2018) found which are *Prospectors, Defenders, Analyzers,* and *Reactors* that business owners could also utilize to implement business sustainability.

Small business owners must often make decisions on a smaller scale than large corporations, in which one may sometimes neglect the fact of having the right strategies in place to operate a successful business. Some small business owners may outsource some products or services to help alleviate complex tasking. Outsourcing is perceived as an approach of a business that enables superior optimization of resources, economic acuity, and passing on some gains to the customer, which often translates into financial benefits for the business (Prystupa & Rzadca, 2015). Strategic sourcing has appeared to also serve as a vital enabler in the international supply chain, arguably with some risk minimization, arising in part from the diversity of a supply chain and the role economics plays in business sustainability (Kotula, Ho, Dey, & Lee, 2015). Companies should continue with alternative business strategies to incorporate to remain afloat within an emerging, global market in the fashion industry. Mbiko, Mbara, and Swanepoel (2017) noted the value and importance of sourcing in making strategic decisions on product and service offerings.

Companies have established operations overseas due to cheaper labor and other costs than in the United States. The human resource department is the “bread and butter” of any organization. HR specialists must implement the best practices (i.e., adequate training, current policies and regulations, and employee retention). When operating on a global scale, companies must have the “best practices” to remain competitive and sustainable because every company is trying to outperform the next organization. Ethical behavior should be displayed on all levels within a business, which may call for scrutiny of existing policies as well as employee practices, to prevent potential ethical impropriety

(Tremblay, Martineau, & Pauchant, 2017). Companies can utilize the findings from Tremblay, Martineau, and Pauchant to implement the best practices that apply within the organization. Pandey and Rhee (2015), noted that effective CEOs use innovative ideas to manage change and increase ethical conduct within a firm. Foreign CEOs that are hired by Japanese firms must have a vision on how to improve the entire company.

Implementing innovative and adaptive strategies arguably increases the likelihood of business success (Slávik & Zagoršek, 2016). A tentative strategic plan is paramount for an organization to flourish during times of hardship, which may help rectify situations in a prompt manner. Successful small business owners could partner up with other entrepreneurs and share information with one another to help keep all entities sustainable in a competitive market. Individuals and strategists with business knowledge could help other business proprietors in structuring a network of strategic partners (Debruelle & Maes, 2015) and incorporate strategies to be profitable. Once a network established, entrepreneurs may implement new ideas within the organization to remain to have a prospering firm.

Entrepreneurship

Effective entrepreneurship stresses often entail informed decision-making to minimize risk, achieved through diligence, with preparation, forming, guiding, and monitoring (Oguonu, 2015). When the above strategies performed tactfully, a small business owner would be able to maneuver products and continue to keep revenue flowing in and out of the company. Entrepreneurs must be willing to take risks, which could be beneficial to the company because it helps to target consumers. Owners of small firms should possibly strive to build and sustain strategic partnerships, which may also be vital to overcome supply shortcomings, which often plagues some industries (Xie, 2018). When new opportunities arise for small business owners, some may use new ventures as a luxury to remain competitive. Owners should have a strategic plan in place to help alleviate transformational failure, and management may have to revamp the strategic blueprint. Duke (2018), recommended cognizance of the five competitive forces in strategy formulation and execution, to include: new entrants, substitute products, buyers, suppliers, and direct competitors.

As a small business owner, there may be times when things may seem unrealistic when commencing a new business venture; however, one must have the passion to continue to push through any hurdles to become successful. Passion is considered vital in thinking strategically, ethically, and innovatively in preventing supply chain disruptions and scarcities in being a debilitating factor, which often impedes business success (Stroe, Wincent, & Parida, 2018). The findings of this study may contribute to entrepreneurship by providing awareness of how vigorous the “values” of an individual and how successful a company can remain sustainable in contemporary society. Small business owners should consider making ethical decisions and rectify issues that arise within the organization. In contemporary settings, businesspeople of all ages and years of experience must make sound decisions (Blewitt, Blewitt, & Ryan, 2018), and ensure that products and service offerings are delivered with integrity and upright ethical conduct at all times to consumers.

Entrepreneurial risk-taking is often considered complex (Baker, 2015). First, one must exercise the right of free will. Entrepreneurial behavior often consists of a premeditated, intentional commitment to put oneself at risk for the sake of some inspired purpose. Secondly, the entrepreneurial risk must be motivated by a desire to deliver benefits to others, not merely to yourself. Dutta (2016) observed that entrepreneurship does not mean any diminution and abandonment of ethical and socio-cultural values. Entrepreneurs are individuals who create and market products and services within a specific geographical location, and success is determined by competitive differentiation and ethically upright display in all customer engagement. Using high performance and ethical teams can deliver a competitive advantage (Pais & Parente, 2015). Collaboration with other businesses could help other companies remain competitive in a global environment.

Owners of a company must make strategic decisions when operating a business, in which one must be able to manage different aspects of a business to flourish and compete with other organizations. Huang and Knight (2017), suggested that a diligent pursuit of entrepreneurship entails the optimal use of human and material resources. As an entrepreneur, owners must have various resources at their disposal to help facilitate sustainability in an emerging business world. Entrepreneurship may be a transformation instrument (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2017) and business owners must be cognizant of current and impending change as an accepted facet of reality during the life and tenure of the business. Entrepreneurs are change agents within the community and provide a product or service within a geographical location.

Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Neagu (2016) noted that only 10% of SMEs endure 5 years or more in the market. A reason that some SMEs fail is that the use of outsourcing products to other vendors. Prystupa and Rzadca (2015), suggested that studying the reasons for business demise, attributed to subcontracting or other causes, could help SMEs avoid the mistakes of others. There are risks involved with outsourcing that managers must understand and be able to alleviate from becoming extinct. The case studies conducted by Prystupa and Rzadca (2015) may offer insightful information to SMEs on the risks associated with outsourcing and informed decisions, which are strategic and economically viable. When there is a disruption in the supply chain, products become limited to consumers and other businesses. Mwangola (2018) posited that organizations could derive supply chain flexibility by purchasing through funds from various systems and should always consider prudent options and alternatives. Small business owners should understand there may be times when interruptions in the supply chain may be unexpected, fixing the problem helps the supply chain continue to prosper and stay afloat in a competitive market.

Stability in relationships and in management usually helps in establishing enduring supplier relationships (Swartout, Boykin, Dixon, & Ivanov, 2015). Small business owners should be aware of employees' and consumers' concerns about the constant changing of leadership within an organization. Senior leadership must consider that the employees are “vital” to any organization. Effective execution of knowledge management often results in making successful strategic business choices and decisions (Adam, Mahadi, & Rahman, 2018). The government implements certain regulations on businesses to make sure each entity is operating safely and productively. Atkinson, Mallet, and Wapshott (2016) advised in favor of businesses heeding explicitly formulated corporate and business directives from credible sources, which often help guide business owners. Globalization has had a huge impact on small business owners. Business owners must revamp the company's strategic plan to become successful on the international level and compete with other small business owners. SMEs in the United States are the backbone of the economy, which some suggest, may account for the contributions of over 99% of all businesses (Elbeltagi, Hamad, Moizer, & Abou-Shook, 2016). Business owners have the luxury of supplying consumers with products or services and making the United States prosper on a global level.

SMEs have the capability and option to pursue strategically and informed which may yield and deliver a competitive unique advantage over other entities (Aksoy, 2017). Small and medium-sized enterprises may be limited to employees, which the owner would have to conduct most of the operations to remain profitable. Laguir, Laguir, and Elbaz (2016) endorsed the value in increasing business success through appropriate and deft use of social marketing and communication. SME owners must have the support of the community to be able to flourish and continue to provide products to the communities and surrounding areas.

Ahi, Baronchelli, Kuivalainen, and Piantoni (2017) provided valuable advice for SME's marketing in a worldwide and global context. When small business owners decide to move operations on an international scale, one must be willing to adopt strategies to help the company compete with the major companies and have solutions in place to surpass the competition. Hsieh and Chou (2018) suggested that as SMEs engage in international operations, when feasible, originality and creativity could advance innovative and tactical thinking to be successful in such ventures. Exporting SMEs for instance often turn to effective management tools to leverage such opportunities (Obadia, Vida, & Pla-Barber, 2017). Owners of small and medium-sized enterprises operate on a smaller scale than larger corporations, which owners must be cautious about, with regards to the strategies and tools to use to remain profitable. Ng and Kee (2018), noted that SMEs are contributors to job creation, poverty alleviation, and economic prosperity.

Small Business Networking

Mohd and Chin (2018), noted business networking facilitates resource and logistics optimization. When companies collaborate with one another, the two entities are building trust with each other. In a large firm, the transfer of knowledge may be difficult to implement because of the various departments within a larger corporation. In a smaller entity, knowledge transfer could be a little easier to exchange because of the limited number of managers within the company. When conducting business-to-business transactions, owners must develop and display mutual trust to build successful relationships (Muldoon, Bauman, & Lucy, (2018). Some small business owners prefer to work independently; however, some entrepreneurs tend to create a partnership with other entities to provide services or products within the community.

In a globalized and networked world, investors and stakeholders are informed and often perform research a company thoroughly over the Internet (Desai, 2018). Business owners could also look at angel investors instead of family or friends to help expand the firm. The interests of investors may be well served in conducting due diligence in financing businesses (Huang, 2018). The study findings of Huang are pertinent to aspiring businesses and novice and seasoned investors, including their collaboration with firms. Organizations should consider the benefits of collaborating with one another because the entities could bring out the best of each company. Storm, Van Gestel, Van de Goor, and Van Oers (2015) noted that the success of partnerships is contingent upon iterations and communication. Ongoing monitoring of the collaboration started in neighborhoods is important to ensure an effective continuous quality improvement process.

Another form of networking for entrepreneurs is advertising. Luca, Hibbert, and McDonald (2015) lamented of the drifting away of social marketing from traditional forms of customer relationship building, and recommend a blend of old and new approaches. Small business owners may have to adapt when networking with other companies, the implementation of strategic planning, to reap the benefits of competitive advantage. Senior management in many businesses usually tend to develop relationships and network with one supplier, rather than the strategy of larger firms, which operate with multiple sellers (Škarpová & Grosová, 2015) and striking a balance may be vital for small businesses.

Another practice for small business networking is outsourcing products to other companies. Outsourcing has been a trend with large organizations, which firms, with a designated development team often handles the tasks of managing the process. A strategic alliance often provides risk mitigation, benefits in economies of scale and a large customer base, and is recommended for small businesses (Kim, 2015). The concept of subcontracting implementation by SMEs may help to facilitate products to consumers. There are risks involved with outsourcing that owners must understand and be able to alleviate from becoming extinct. The case studies conducted by Prystupa and Rzadca (2015) offer insightful information for SMEs on the risks associated with outsourcing and in making successful strategic decisions that may reduce risks and increase business goal attainment. Networking plays a vital role in businesses to remain sustainable in an ever-changing market. Sharafizad and Coetzer (2016) suggested four important mechanisms for networks among SMEs to pay attention to notable actors within the market, individuals’ relationships inside the market, flow between individuals and within the market, and interaction between people within the market.

Networking is a valuable tool that some business owners could utilize at one’s disposal to remain sustainable. Networking will likely increase the opportunities for businesses in advancing success (Phillips, 2017). Entrepreneurs are individuals, who invent new products, considered valuable to consumers and other companies. Complex problems are either at the local or global level, which could be categorized into smaller tasks to be able to handle the problem and maintain the integrity of the company. Grosser, Moon, and Nelson (2017) noted that business ethics means doing the right things within the organization; however, small business owners must also consider and formulate strategies to prevent ethical misconduct.

Online Retailing

Online retailers have fewer overheads in retail space and possibly inventory costs, which brick-and-mortar shops must factor into costs and profitability plans (Aydinliyim, Pangburn, & Rabinovich, 2017). Some brick-and-mortar small business owners do not have an e-commerce website for consumers to purchase products, which may cause an adverse effect on business profits within the market. Li, Lu, and Talebian (2015) suggested that online retailers and traditional retailers may implement very dissimilar strategic plans in the wake of different operating models, predicated by economics and costs of carrying inventories. Entrepreneurs may have to re-evaluate one's strategic plan and implement new ideas to help remain sustainable against online retailers.

Crews (2015) found and advised business leaders on three core ways to conduct ethnographic expectancy: incasting, forecasting, and co-evolution. Small business owners could utilize the ethnographic foresight system to help forecast how new values and behaviors may establish new futures. Trends may help companies remain competitive on a domestic and international level. There are various applications at consumers' disposal to make transactions right from a cell phone instead of waiting to purchase from a computer or laptop. Applications are continuing to emerge in today's competitive market. The process of online retailing works just like the GST, which all parties involved, creates a structure to help facilitate the final product to customers. Fashion trends in the retail industry are changing on a regular basis. The expectant life cycle of garments is becoming alarming shorter due to new trends emerging during each fashion season. Online fashion retailers experience more returns than traditional stores since there is no physical store for customers to return items back for refunds and damaged or defective merchandise (Difrancesco, Huchzermeier, & Schröder, 2018). Fashion boutiques or large retail stores must find alternatives to deplete inventory after trends become obsolete. Kostecki (1998) noted that the fashion industry is complex, as fashion trends and product obsolescence, and merchandise returns often pose challenges in inventory management and in ensuring profits.

The model of relationship marketing in online selling must include constant innovation (Verma, Sharma, & Sheth, 2016). Small business owners could benefit from having alternative marketing strategies because online purchasing could make brick-and-mortar companies close the doors or necessitate merging with other businesses under one name. Shao (2017) observed that aligning with Forrester's forecasts and models helped several e-retailers to achieve 7.4% of all trade sales globally in 2015. Brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners may have to look at the current retail industry and find ways to help counter the threat of online retailers.

Online customer satisfaction is enhanced with sellers focusing on providing optimal service and extensive information on a website (Azar, Khan, & Shavaid, 2015). Some traditional brick-and-mortar business is having to foray into the e-commerce world to help the company remain profitable, on the other hand, some of the brick-and-mortar stores may have to close for good if failing to transition into online purchasing. Hu, Rabinovich, and Hou (2015) cautioned that online retailers must strive to enhance customer satisfaction at the pre and post-post-purchase stages.

The absence of physical contact in the availability of merchandise for online customers is often a deterrent to purchase for some (Kerrebroeck, Williams, & Brengman, 2017) since consumers only see images of merchandise until it is delivered. The thing about online retailing is that consumers will have to wait until the product is delivered to conduct a physical inspection; unlike in a brick-and-mortar store, where the product could be inspected in-person. Balan and Mathew (2016) noted that consumers make purchase decisions based on reviews and testimonials. The attitude and behavior of individuals when making an online purchase could help determine if the consumer makes a future purchase.

Seetharaman, Niranjan, Balaji, and Saravanan (2017) advocated for e-commerce sites to stress honesty in all sales, including returns, with full and honest disclosure on merchandise and product offerings. Business owners who have merged with the e-commerce environment must consider, that consumers could have a huge impact on the success of the company when receiving feedback from a product. Jones and Livingstone (2015) suggested, that with the exponential increase in online buying, sellers must be cognizant of technological and human issues and challenges in retailing. Some traditional brick-and-mortar stores could shut down for good, alternative ways to merge with the constant change of e-commerce is not sought and found.

Dubas, Hershey, and Dubas (2015) argued in favor of retailers providing online and traditional shopping options, which gives the customer more choices. Small business owners who maintain online and a traditional physical store could benefit; however, one must be able to balance among the two to become sustainable beyond the first 5 years from the business establishment. Customers should be attentive deceitful practices by retailers or the lack of full disclosure and information, and expectedly such businesses and vendors will likely suffer the loss of reputation and customer patronage (Ha, Kankanhalli, Kishan, & Huang, 2016).

Technology

Organizational culture is often a predictor of customer responsiveness by a business (Hoorn, 2017). Companies must be able to implement technology within the organization to remain sustainable and be competitive with other firms. Leadership often plays a pivotal role in the decision to adopt pertinent technology within a company. Once the implementation of technology embeds within SMEs, some employees may have to be trained to leverage it advantageously. Reich (2018) observed that information technology also includes any device that can be used in the dissemination of communication and information and influence individuals. The development of a network is found to improve the relationships between the various entities involved and generally can bring in new ideas to implement within each organization.

Social media is another valuable tool that small business owners could use at one's disposal to get feedback from consumers. Some business owners utilize social media to market and receive feedback from products (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017), which could also aid in improving products and service quality. Advance and improvements in technology have often made businesses change the way it operates and many use social media as a marketing tool as well. Case studies may provide insight into how social media could be utilized as an open innovation tool for companies creating new products.

Entrepreneurs could benefit from the study findings because managers could use social media as a tool (i.e., surveys or feedback) on forecasting products to consumers. Omar (2015) argued that social networking involves fostering and augmenting relations between corporations and internal and external stakeholders and consumers. Entrepreneurs must network with various people and agencies to continue to remain sustainable and find alternatives ways to ensure cash flow within one business, and this is a valuable premise for brick-and-mortar fashion retailers.

The integration of technology could help promote competitiveness within a firm when competing against other companies. Entrepreneurs should utilize the use of social media as an advantage to help stay sustainable with competing firms. Small business owners may profit from community engagement to aid business development (Piispanen & Paloniemi, 2015), when implemented may help managers surpass the first 5 years of inception. There are numerous opportunities for entrepreneurs to pursue and take advantage of, which could make organizations profitable. From the views of Jones, Harrison, and Jones (2018), it is explicit, that when firms create strong bonds in the form of loyalty relationships with stakeholders, the quest for sustainable, competitive advantage may be more assured. Some business owners neglect the fact of having up to date technology to help increase customer sales, and maybe a consideration for traditional fashion retailers. Many companies in the contemporary environment opt for digital and technological competencies (Alina, 2018) to attract or retain consumers. Business applications are created and favored by many, for integration and application in mobile devices (Heitkötter, Kuchen, & Majchrzak, 2015). Small business owners that incorporate apps for consumers to use to purchase products have an upper leg on owners that continue to stick with the traditional way of conduct operations. The use of mobile apps could aid in increasing the self-confidence of consumers in making informed product purchase choices (Carter & Yeo, 2016). There are various applications at consumers' disposal to make transactions right from a cell phone instead of waiting to purchase from a computer or laptop. Loyalty programs also play a significant role in building company-consumer relations and influence competitive advantage over competitors (Shulga & Tanford, 2018). Business owners should keep consumers in mind when providing services or products because without having loyal customers, firms could see a decline in revenue. Scott, Loonam, and Kumar (2017) noted that technology could facilitate business and customer relationships for the organization. Technology continues to play a critical role in the business world because companies could market, receive feedback from a product, and network with other organizations. The Internet has helped some small business owners remain profitable because e-commerce is changing how firms operate for longevity, and different strategies must be sought and leveraged by traditional fashion retailers. Consumers have the Internet at the disposal, for shopping, using computers, mobile devices, and tablets, which can be done at the click of a mouse instead of going to a traditional brick-and-mortar store. Disruptive technologies have often rendered the status quo irrelevant in markets by redefining consumers, markets, and merchandise (Crous, 2017).

Gaps in Contemporary Business Knowledge

There are apparent gaps in contemporary academic and practitioner business literature on the strategic imperatives and approaches necessary for traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques to combat the threat of online retailers. Researchers have often failed to study how small business owners could find alternative ways for brick-and-mortar stores to emerge into the e-commerce world and remain sustainable in the face of the threat posed by online shopping environments. The first, gap in contemporary academic and practitioner business literature, may denote the relative absence of studies on disruptive technology and the impact on consumer trends relevant to brick-and-mortar stores. Second, a gap in business knowledge may be scholar-practitioners failing to provide adequate insight into small business owners on ways to overcome the threat of online retailing. A third, gap in contemporary academic and practitioner literature may reflect a lack of research on how traditional brick-and-mortar managers should continue to entice consumers to shop within a traditional store instead, of favoring online purchasing. Major retail chains like Toys "R" Us and JCPenny are closing stores due to the disruptive trends of e-commerce, with Amazon and other leaders revolutionizing the online shopping phenomenon. The success of Amazon and other online retailers reflects how strategies continue to evolve and change the way consumers buy products. Many traditional brick-and-mortar stores that have not adapted to customer trends have filed file bankruptcy, which may indicate a failure to meet the demands of the online retailing world. The gaps in contemporary academic and practitioner business literature outlined present a case for the study on the need to explore strategies that traditional brick-and-mortar fashion retailers need to survive in a changing business environment. The findings of the study may yield business strategies that online retailers can use to innovate and find solutions to the new trend and threat of online retailing.

Transition

Section 1 represents an introduction to the aims and purpose of the research study, and the rationale and the imperatives for brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to negate the threat of online retailers. Section 1 contains the background to the problem, problem and purpose statements, the nature of the study, the research question, and interview questions. The remaining content in Section 1 included the conceptual framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, significance of the study, and a review of the academic and professional literature. In Section 2, the discussion includes details on the role of the researcher, participants, research method and design, population and sampling techniques, ethical research, data collection, data analysis, measures to maintain and enhance reliability and validity in a qualitative study setting. Section 3 consists of details to denote potential future application to findings from this study to professional practice, the possible implications and contributions of the study to positive social change, recommendations for action, derived and formulated from a comprehensive analysis of data, recommendations for further research, personal research reflections, and the culmination of the study represented in summary and study conclusions.

Section 2: The Project

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to negate the threat of online retailing. The case study population entailed small business owners of traditional privately owned fashion boutiques, who have operated a retail business profitably for at least 5 years in the southeast United States. The targeted population consisted of a purposeful sample representing five privately owned fashion boutique owners who have demonstrated and implemented strategies to negate the threat of online retailing. Discoveries from this study may advance and contribute to fostering employment, thereby improving the quality of lives of business owners, employees, and families in the southeast United States.

Role of the Researcher

The primary role of the researcher for a qualitative study necessitates creativity in data collection and analysis (Mukhopadhyay & Gupta, 2014). Using a multiple case study, I interacted and collaborated with participants through semistructured face-to-face interviews. Secondary data were collected from the companies' profit and loss statements. Yin (2014) noted that the triangulation of data against the primary findings from semistructured interviews may serve as a model for a multiple case study. The researcher must always maintain high ethical standards to achieve a quality study.

My role as a researcher involved adhering to research ethics and the Belmont report. I attended the online NIH training on the protection of human research participants (Certificate number #1721235). The Belmont Report principles serve as guidelines for the welfare of the research topic, in which community-engaged investigators often eschew the role of the subject for that of participants (Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, & Khodyakov, 2015). The Belmont Report provides adequate insights to scholar-practitioners on the importance of ethical research and protects participants in the study. Trust can be a beneficial factor when trying to gather data from participants. Curtis, Herbst, and Gumkovska (2010) stated that trust involves risk-taking on both parts, not just the public sector agent. Some scholars have suggested that augmenting the Belmont Report with relational principles, such as reflexivity, reciprocity, and trust can help support ethical practice in community-engaged research (Bromley et al., 2015).

Bracketing is a technique that researchers often use to set aside preunderstanding and to act non-judgmentally in conducting unstructured qualitative interviews (Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). The interview questions used aligned with the research question, which served to avoid personal bias. Developing an interview protocol was beneficial to conduct the interviews systematically and consistently throughout the study. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) noted that an interview protocol can provide qualitative researchers with a means to undertake the study with a structured and consistent approach. The interview guide ensures interviews cover all aspects of the information and data sought. The interview protocol in this study provided structure and consistency in conducting the semistructured interviews. Dikko (2016) stated that an interview protocol is a set of rules and guidelines used for conducting interviews. The interview protocol provided uniformity in undertaking and completing semistructured interviews of participants in this research study.

Participants

Understanding the business strategies of privately owned fashion boutique owners was the focal point of this qualitative multiple case study. The research strategy entailed using a purposive sample of five privately-owned fashion boutique owners from the southeast United States, with interviews continuing, until no new data emerged, as the aim was to achieve saturation of data and thoroughness in data inquiry. Data saturation represents the stage where after conducting multiple interviews, subsequent participants, offer views already provided by preceding interviewees and no new information. Hancock, Amankwaa, Revell, and Mueller (2016) stated that employing three different methods of data analysis to confirm saturation and transparency provides qualitative researchers with different approaches to data analysis for saturation and enhancement of trustworthiness. After achieving data saturation, conducting further interviews yielded repetitions in the data already collected and diminishing to no returns in quality data. The redundancy and repetitions when data saturation is reached are a possible indicator that the process is halted (Sims-Gould et al., 2016). Through a suitable sample, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the owners of each organization who provided direct contact and availability. The interviews included managers from different fashion boutique small businesses and a review of financial and other documents from these firms served as secondary data for a holistic multiple case study analysis.

The selection process for participants included privately owned fashion boutique owners, over the age of 21 and operating businesses in the southeast United States. The selection and eligibility criteria for participants was that those willing to take part must be knowledgeable business leaders in the fashion industry and a part of SMEs that have been profitable by the end of the first 5 years from business start-up. To gain access to the participants, I delivered a letter to the business owners describing the purpose of the study. Then, I answered any questions the prospective participants had about the study. The participant selection and eligibility criteria aligned with the research aims and reflected the overarching research question to achieve the objective of the study. I assigned each participant with a unique identifier to protect their privacy throughout the study. The onus is on researchers to assure participants that voluntary participation is process confidential (Nkansah & Chimbwanda, 2016), I ensured in this study.

Research Method and Design

The rationale for selecting a research method and design is to choose the most appropriate approach to answer the central research question (Hayes, Bonner, & Douglas, 2013; Yin, 2014). I selected a qualitative method and a case study for this research. Vohra (2014) noted that case studies combine a variety of data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and archives.

For this research study, I used a qualitative research method. Using a qualitative methodology, as noted by Kimball and Turner (2018), can aid in analyzing data and developing suitable conclusions with the appropriate invocation of the theoretical underpinning, as denoted in the conceptual framework. Chatha, Butt, and Tariq (2015) stated that quantitative studies are based on the use of statistical techniques for data analysis. Quantitative research was not suitable for the research, because numerical data does not provide human insights into understanding a business problem. McCusker and Gunaydin (2015) stated that mixed-method research might lead researchers working under tight budgetary or time constraints to reduce sample sizes or limit the time spent interviewing. The mixed-methods approach was not suitable for this study, as this form of research typically involves longer timelines and more complex analysis from the combination of two research approaches used in tandem.

The study entailed the use of an exploratory, multiple case study design. Leoni (2015) noted that case studies work well in management research because of their potential for a thorough analysis of a case within a real-life context. Case studies often involve combining a variety of data collection methods such as interviews, questionnaires, observation, and archives (Vohra, 2014). Other research designs considered were ethnography, grounded theory, and phenomenology. Zilber (2014) noted that ethnography studies might yield indispensable insights into the social dynamics of the phenomena under study within a specific field of research. The grounded theory design usually necessitates using data in the development of theories to understand and explain a phenomenon (Ding, 2014). In phenomenological research, exploring experience means focusing on human lives, actions, and reflections with a certain subjectivity (Tomkins & Eatough, 2013). Qualitative research does not require a set number of participants but rather represents the achievement of sufficiency and saturation. While qualitative research using data and analyses is often amenable to fit researcher preferences, they must ensure rigor and fit and demonstrate a high-quality study (Bansal, Smith, & Vaaro, 2018).

Population and Sampling

Padykula (2016) noted that purposeful sampling is intended to facilitate the option and choice by the researcher to exercise individual judgment in intentionally selecting participants willing to provide information relevant to the research questions. From the population of fashion boutique owners in the southeast United States, the purposeful selection of a sample included five business owners of privately owned fashion boutiques. A purposeful sampling of sites and interviews requires substantial time, understanding the local context (Bungay, Oliffe, & Atchison, 2016), as it was in this study.

The adequacy of sample size can help facilitate data saturation in a multiple case study. Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013) noted that without the justification of sample size, the implication is that the sample size is arbitrary and inconsequential. Data collection consisted of primary research in the form of participant interviews and secondary data was sourced and derived from a combination of company financial records and information and other documents and data depicting, the profitability and performance of the businesses. The sample size of five case units, with comprehensive interviewing and using methodological triangulation, also aided in reaching data saturation. Anyan (2013) suggested that to control the power of imbalances in data collection and analysis, an interviewer should systematically have studied the research process to uncover the maneuverings of power. The selection of participants for this study required the eligibility criteria of a minimum of age of 21, knowledge of the fashion industry, and status as a privately owned fashion boutique owner or manager with business operations located in the southeast United States. Participants needed to be involved with a business demonstrating a record of consistent profitability and success by the end of the first 5 years after start-up, which I verified by checking company records and financial statements. The interviews took place at the participants' office or place within the business in an area or location that was free from distractions.

Ethical Research

After the approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), the study continued with data collection and safeguards and measures were put in place to prevent any possible ethical concerns and incidents, during the duration of the research. Such precautionary measures aided in ensuring the trustworthiness required to ensure the quality of the research. Yalcintas and Selcuk (2016) stated that research ethics is about virtuous intellectuals and researchers who try to behave responsibly to the members of the community of scholar-practitioners. The findings from the research and the semistructured interviews helped gain insight into successful strategies, and a review of the company's documents provided corroboration on how the organization has remained profitable. The written recordings of observations of the participants supplemented the recording of data collected in this study, which yielded valuable information on business success and sustainability. McIntosh and Morse (2015) noted that using an interview questionnaire comprised of predetermined questions, followed by subquestions or probes, is essential to collect comprehensive data.

The participants were informed that the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw at any time during the face-to-face semistructured interviews and not face any negative consequences for a decision on abstaining and refusing to continue. The participants were informed that there are no incentives for participating in the study. The principle of the informed consent indicated that it is the researcher’s responsibility to completely inform participants of different aspects of the incomprehensible research language (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). Ethical leaders conducting research, or conducting business, were fair, principled decision-makers, and who behaved ethically daily (Demitras, 2015). The participants who met the inclusionary criteria for participating in this study received an informed consent form, personally delivered and the intent of the study was fully explained. The personally delivered informed consent form provided to the participants the opportunity of full disclosure, notably to review and sign the consent form in person before departing the location. After the acknowledgment of the consent forms, the interviewees were contacted in person or by telephone to discuss the time and dates of suitability to partake in the semistructured interviews. For the study, participants were assigned alphanumerical codes to help mask the identity of each interviewee's identity in the study. The data collected from the interviews stored on a personal, password-protected, external hard drive and I bear sole responsibility for deleting the data after 5 years from the completion of the study to protect the confidentiality of all study participants. The measures to remove the data after 5 years of the conclusion of the study will be specific and programmable by date, while the hard copies of study data will be manually shredded and incinerated thereafter.

Data Collection Instruments

Yin (2014) noted that qualitative researchers could conduct a case study from any of the six sources: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) direct observation, (d) interviews, (e) participants' observation, and (f) physical artifacts. I served as the data collection instrument in this multiple case study. In-depth, face-to-face semistructured interviews are the primary data and company documentation would be the secondary data. There were one-on-one semistructured interviews conducted with five southeast United States privately owned fashion boutique owners to explore business strategies implemented in addressing the threat of online retailing in the fashion industry, to purely traditional and other such retailers. As interviews involved one-on-one interaction and sensitive issues often arise, it is important that the researcher considers all ethical aspects of conducting a quality study (Doody & Noonan, 2013), which kept in mind while undertaking this study.

The research involved participants who had comprehensive and innate knowledge and understanding of the fashion retail industry before signing an informed consent form. The interview protocol is listed in the table of contents as well for review. A case study served to focus on the topic and may have also aided in enhancing reliability within the research. The case study protocol consisted of an overview of the study project, data collection, data collection question, and guide for the study report (Yin, 2014). The goal of a case study research is created as accurate and as complete as possible a description of the case (Cronin, 2014). The perusal of company documents for data triangulation was in the form of cash current and archival flow and profit and loss statements, which was used in comprehensive analysis and supplemented the careful review of the data collected from the interviews.

After the completion of the interviews, the use of member checking assured the precision of interview recordings. West (2015) stated that member checking is performed by returning the transcripts to the subjects to ensure that the script accurately captured each comment and corresponding feelings about each question. In addition to member checking, each participant was personally delivered a copy of the transcript to review for any errors, which also served to ensure the accuracy of the semistructured interview. Multiple data sources are suggested to be used rather than only one source to capture the contextual complexity of the area under investigation (Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011) and the case study precept was adhered to in this study. The objective of triangulation is to diminish researcher bias in the data and the likelihood of misinterpretation when checking the findings from various data sources and perspectives (Cho & Lee, 2014), a principle followed in this study as well.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection techniques involve observations, interviews, video recording, and site visits that could aid when conducting research with participants (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The most appropriate research approach that was used to answer the research question was a qualitative exploratory, multiple case study. Yu, Abdullah, and Saat (2014) noted that case study research contributes significantly to the in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, within the unique context of the study.

Before gathering data, I applied for and obtained IRB approval from the University and had a copy of the signed informed consent forms from each participant on file. Interviews constituted the primary source of data when using a case study. I used the interview protocol during the interview with each participant. The interview guide is in Appendix A. I only made an in-person site visit of five potential participants of a privately owned fashion boutique owner, hence where I provided each participant with a copy of the consent form to keep for their records.

Another method that I used throughout the study is methodological triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the use of combining multiple methods to collect and analyze data, which hence provided verification and validity to help analyze data to draw insightful and pertinent industry-specific conclusions. The use of archival documents and observations of the participants was considered secondary sources of data triangulation. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using member checking and transcript reviews. Birt et al. (2016) stated that member checking is the process of returning analyzed data after being transcribed helps validate the credibility of the information provided by the participants.

Transcript reviews were undertaken after the semistructured interviews were transcribed and involved participants reviewing the transcripts, to make and additional edits or comments. A transcript review is a process where the participants are provided verbatim transcripts after the conclusion of the interviews to clarify, verify the accuracy, and correct any mistakes during the transcribing (Hagens, Dobrow, & Chafe, 2009), and as stated, was followed in this study. In qualitative research, traditional audio recording interviews are helpful for the researcher to re-listen to a portion, or an entire study participant interview, to transcribe and analyze the data collected thereafter. For this study, a Sony© ICDBX140 digital recorder was used to record interviews, after obtaining permission from the study participants. I transcribed the interview recording of each participant into a Microsoft Word document. Kwasnicka, Dombrowski, White, and Sniehotta (2015) stated that video and audio could aid memory and the interview gives the participant an opportunity to reflect on the recordings. The interviews were recorded using a traditional, high-quality audio recorder**.** During the duration of the interviews, I took notes for observations, thoughts, facial expressions, and body language.

Member checking is a technique where the informants verify or clarify that the information provides accurate and would aid in the credibility of the data (Livari, 2018). When conducting research, researchers often use a technique called member checking to help to validate participant information, so that there is verification that the information is accurate or an opportunity for a participant to amend or add additional data. Member checking helps to aid in checking preliminary findings with the participants, in which the scholar would have concrete data after the review of the informants (Caretta, 2016). The member checking validation with study participants took place as soon as feasible, after the scheduled interview, so that the information and transcripts could facilitate the ease of recall and thereby facilitate and afford greater accuracy of information.

Data Organization Technique

As stated, using a Sony BX digital audio recorder player to record the participant interviews was the tool used to record the interviews. The device was tested before each scheduled interview to ensure the audio recorder worked properly, and that the audio was loud and clear. Audio transcripts also provided an additional and secure method of collecting data storage, archiving, and sharing (Berazneva, 2014). The inference drawn from the views of Berazneva (2014) is that audio transcripts could help aid in collecting data, in which the researcher can review the recorded interviews. The use of a reflective journal was beneficial to take notes throughout the interviews and jot down important comments, in addition to the audio recording. Sendell and Domocol (2013) stated that reflective journaling helps to form a connection with the content, which allows us to think deeply and explore robustly and thoroughly.

Data Analysis

Mayer (2015), stated that data triangulation is the use of more than one approach to the research question to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings. Yin (2014) noted qualitative case study researchers could triangulate data from multiple sources such as documentation, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts to support their research studies. The interview questions addressed the central research question on exploring business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners in combating the threat of online retailing to sustain business beyond the initial 5 years where many small businesses are most vulnerable. Alsaawi (2014) noted that qualitative interviews give the interviewee the chance to elaborate and explain specific issues, where necessary, through the invocation of open-ended questions. Participants were asked in-person to peruse company documents in the form of monthly cash flow and profit and loss statements as secondary data for analysis.

Transcript reviews were useful to ensure the accuracy and validity of the raw data after the completion of the semistructured interviews with the participants. The semistructured interviews were transcribed and shared with participants. After the completion of reviewing each interview, participants had the option to verify the transcript review, with the opportunity provided to participants, to verify these, and this specific measure possibly served to enhance the reliability and validity of the results. In addition to the transcript reviews, member checking also by participants, conducted after all interviews are completed and data reviewed. Member checking was developed in qualitative research as a way of assessing validity (Madill & Sullivan, 2017).

Interviews convened until no new themes emerged, which represented the attainment of data saturation. After the completion of the accuracy of the participants' data, the process of data assembly and analysis involved the use of NVivo© 12 software. Next, I performed data cleansing and the reduction, an important step to remove all unnecessary data that did not coincide with the search criteria. Jacobs, et al. (2016) noted that clean data enables accurate analysis. The use of alphanumerical codes served to conceal the identity of each interviewee and thereby assured the confidentiality of participants throughout the research. Also, each participant was given identity numbers along with a letter p such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth. Coding is the process of putting together extracts (across documents) that are related to each other into basins called nodes (Zamawe, 2015). For the research, the use of the GST added to the insight, albeit from a theoretical vantage point and helped deepen the exploration into the business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners in countering the threat of online retailing.

Reliability and Validity

Grossoehme (2014) noted that reliability and validity are two important areas, which relate to the accuracy and exactness of research. Reliability is not germane to qualitative studies because the tests and measures used to establish the validity and reliability of quantitative research cannot be applied to qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015). The interviewees in a research study ideally should have a thorough understanding of the intent of the study, further possible with the measure to guarantee their confidentiality throughout the study. All participants were asked the same open-ended interview questions, made possible by adhering to the interview protocol. Case study procedures were followed and included member checking and transcript reviews by study participants.

Reliability

Reliability is a term less associated with qualitative studies in a quantitative contextual interpretation, and the tests and measures used to establish the validity and reliability of a numerically oriented quantitative form of research cannot be applied to qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015). Dependability is the contextually related term of qualitative research to the parallel of reliability in quantitative research. Weir et al. (2015) stated the credibility of research is dependent on the ability of end-users to assess the study design, conduct, and analysis. Achieved and enhanced reliability necessitated incorporating various strategies, such as methodical triangulation, member checking, constant participation, and response from participants throughout the study. The aim was to demonstrate and enact methodical triangulation of the data collected from semistructured interviews, through a collection, scrutiny, and analysis of documents relating to businesses' profitability of selected enterprises.

Measures like overlapping of methods such as interviews and site visits to collect data to ensure the credibility of findings, which in turn takes care of the dependability of the study (Sarma, 2015). When conducting a study, researchers must make sure that the data collected is consistent and one continues to obtain the same outcomes. The implications from the views of Connelly (2016) indicated that the procedures for dependability include maintenance of an audit trail of process logs and peer-debriefings with a colleague. Researchers usually must make sure that all aspects of the study are covered, which may include taking notes and observing the participants for visual clues and other expressions.

I made ascertain that the reliability of this study by taking notes of processes from the data collected through data interpretation. A detailed description provided in outlining the foundation and strategies in undertaking this study included stating the conditions for choosing the research participants. Lastly, the details and description of the implementation of the research process for this study include the steps taken to build and establish rapport established between researcher and the research-participant, the process of data, and analysis and other measures instituted to complete and execute a quality study.

Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to aid in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon study. Triangulation requires using various sources of data and methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Anton, 2015). The use of the company's records and archival documents were used to triangulate data in the study. Greene (2014) noted that peer briefing is a technique where the researcher shares study findings with peers and colleagues. Member checking is another technique that scholars have often used when conducting a study. Member checking is the process of presenting data transcripts or data interpretation of the participants for accuracy (Varpio., Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O'Brien, & Rees, 2017).

Validity

Dependability is intimately linked with credibility, as the two terms often work in conjunction with one another (Charlesworth & Foëx, 2016). Qualitative researchers often strive to enhance credibility, since it is usually deemed a reflection of dependability. Leoni (2015) stated that validity in qualitative research means "appropriateness" of the tools, processes, and data. Harper and Cole (2012) noted that member checking is a research strategy to enable participants to validate the accuracy of the findings. In a case study, a scholar-practitioner can achieve validation through various procedures and tactics such as methodical triangulation, peer review analysis, and prolonged engagement. Henry and Foss (2015) mentioned that case study research is a qualitative form of inquiry; typically involving a detailed investigation of one or more organizations (or groups within organizations) and draws on data collected over a period. After gained consent from the interviewees for audio recording, which Berazneva (2014) suggested could directly correspond to the answers entered in computer-assisted personal interviewing software; playback of the audio recording could help formulate themes, patterns, and facilitate analysis of data. Methodical triangulation from the interviews and document reviews ensured the collection of data, using multiple sources, to supplement interview and observation data, which aided in fulfilling the study objectives and contributing to the depth in the answers to the research question.

Creditability is a term used when conducting qualitative research rather than validity. The researcher describing personal experiences as a researcher and verifying the research findings with participants (Cope, 2014) enhances credibility. Hence, the researcher is the study instrument, therefore; creditability depends on the scholar about the steps taken throughout the research process. The possible inference from the work of Hammarberg, Kirkman, and Lacey (2016) is that credibility is the criterion for evaluating the truth value or internal validity of qualitative research.

Scholars research by using the shoulders of other researchers or by transferability, where one could use previous studies to help aid future researches. From the view of the works of Hagood and Skinner (2015), it may be noted that transferability is the showing of findings that must be carefully assessed to the expressly framed theoretical underpinning in a study which and could apply to other contexts as well. The interpretation of the research findings from the undertaken and study presented herein could provide insights for future practitioners and researchers to continue to generate new data for the fashion boutique industry. I used a purposive sampling method and provided an in-depth description of the research process, findings, and academic references to enhance the transferability of the study findings. Cope (2014) noted that researchers should provide adequate information on the participants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the study findings of being transferable to other contexts.

To achieve confirmability, researchers must ensure that the data presented is the reflection of the participant's responses and not viewpoints or bias of the scholar. The interpretation should not be based on individual preferences and viewpoints, rather needs to be grounded in the data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The two strategies many researchers use to determine confirmability is an audit trail and reflexivity. An audit trail is a collection of materials and notes used in the research process that documents the researcher's decisions and assumptions (Cope, 2014). The audit trail helps clarify to readers how the scholar interpreted the data collected when conducting the study. The inference from the findings of Berger (2015) is that reflexivity in qualitative research is affected by whether the researcher is part of the research and shares the participants' experience. I utilized the audit trail and reflexivity strategies for the research as presented in this manuscript.

Data saturation is reflective of the researcher making the determination that with extensive discussions in the interviews regarding the topic of inquiry and the ensuing data gathered, no new data appears to emerge (Sims-Gould, et al, 2016). Data saturation was determined and discernible to the researcher, who can take cues once the data becomes consistent and no new data seemingly emerges, thereby denoting the achievement of this stage in the data collection. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbon (2015) stated that data saturation refers to reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data contribute to little or nothing new to the research. Data were confirmed by the measures described to ensure reliability and validity in a qualitative setting in this study and then analyzed using a process of constant comparison to carefully scrutinize for commonalities and differences, from which patterns and themes were discernable, facilitated with the application of NVivo© 12 software to achieve these goals.

Transition and Summary

Section 2 included a restatement of the purpose statement, the role of the researcher, the selected participants, and an in-depth explanation of the rationale of research methodology and design. This section also included a description of the population and sampling method, a measure to ensure ethical research, data collection instrument techniques, and organization and data analysis techniques. Section 2 also represented a detailed discussion of the methods and techniques to ensure the reliability and validity of the research. Section 3 commences with an introduction including the purpose statement, the overarching research question, and the presentation of the findings. Section 3 also consists of details to denote potential future application to findings from this study to professional practice, the possible implications and contributions of the study to positive social change, recommendations for action, derived and formulated from a comprehensive analysis of data, recommendations for further research, personal research reflections, and the culmination of the study represented in summary and study conclusion.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to combat the threat of online retailing. Five privately owned fashion boutique owners from different traditional retailers in the fashion industry in the southeast United States were selected and recruited to participate in this study. The interviews were analyzed using a process of data reduction and constant comparison, and key themes emerged from the most frequently occurring conversations in the interviews. The data collected were analyzed first and then triangulated against secondary credible sources, such as fashion industry reports and peer-reviewed journals. During data analysis, using the NVivo software, I compared interview notes, transcriptions from the interviews, and the sales and financial reports from each business to provide reliability and validity. The three main themes that emerged from the data analysis were (a) marketing, (b) fashion, and (c) customer preference. There were also minor themes that emerged from the analysis of the data, which manifested as community events and product shelf life.

Presentation of the Findings

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to negate the threat of online retailers? Five privately owned fashion boutique owners shared perspectives for this research about some of the important challenges to combat the threat of online retailing, which included favored strategies on the importance of marketing, fashion trends, and customer preference. The fashion boutique business owners interviewed in this study presented information and discernible strategies to overcome the challenges experienced when trying to remain sustainable against online competitors. I used semistructured interviews with open-ended questions so that participants could offer in-depth information on strategies used to combat the threat of retailers and retailing. Before the start of the interviews, I provided all participants with a copy of the informed consent form to have for their personal records. Each participant signed an additional copy of the consent form to partake willingly in the study, which I kept for my records.

Walden University's IRB granted the authorization to execute the study on July 2, 2019, with the authorization number of 07-02-19-0317060. After 5 to 7 days from the initial interviews, there were 15 minutes of follow-up semistructured interviews as an additional measure to confirm and achieve data saturation. Reaching data saturation after conducting five individual interviews required completing four rounds of interviews with participants to ensure strength in the study and collected data. Data saturation is defined as the point in data collection and analysis when no new themes emerge or present new or fundamental changes or revelation to the existing and repetitive data already collected (Hagaman & Wutich, 2017).

All interviews took place at the business owner's location out of the view of the public and away from distractions. I reviewed the participants' sales reports and the SBA website to show the validity of the triangulation by using multiple sources of secondary data to supplement the primary information collected for this study. I protected the identity of each participant by assigning codes of P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 to each participant. Member checking was conducted after the completion of the transcription of each interview. After confirmation from the participants, I used qualitative data analysis software to analyze the collected data. The use of qualitative data analysis software NVivo facilitated deeper analysis and fostered a greater understanding of the data collected, in respect of business and profitability aspects of returns on investment, sustainability, inventory management, and other imperatives of competitive differentiation in an environment where customer preferences determine business management and economic success. The main goal of using analytical software was to see which words appeared frequently and determine the most dominant themes which might have predicated business prudence in a business environment of constant change.

The data collected from the research led to the identification of frequently and commonly reoccurring themes that participants shared during the semistructured interviews. While conducting the data analysis, I focused on themes that were pertinent to the overarching research question and used the theoretical underpinnings presented in the conceptual framework for deeper and holistic consumer behavioral analysis. Based on the overarching research question, the data analysis of responses provided by the participants revealed three primary themes: marketing, fashion, and customer preference.

P1, P3, P4, and P5 noted that doing events to give back to the community is a way to show appreciation to customers. Active engagement in community events could help boutique owners attract new consumers; the strategy of community involvement usually presents opportunities to network and enhance the relationship with customers in the form of current, previous, and prospective buyers. When small business owners give back to the community, such initiatives also promote positive social change in geographical location and the business may earn some equity and appreciation in customer acquisition and retention as well. All participants stated that once a product has been on the shelf for a certain period, the merchandise is marked down at a discounted price. Perhaps offering such discounted products at community events could spur customer traffic to traditional stores and foster customer loyalty and acquisition.

Theme 1: Importance of Marketing

The first dominant theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the importance of marketing. P3 stated, "I would say using social media—it's a really good tool and probably one of the less expensive ways to market and advertise your store, brand, or whatever it is." P4 noted, "Whenever we post something on social media, people come in for that item. Because they be like, "Oh, I can't find this online, and we be like "Oh, we have it in the store." P2 expressed, "Everything is online, so I don't really do online, but I can tell you that I do a little of eBay sales, and what I can tell you that really helps is your feedback ratings." P5 did not mention anything about online for marketing. P1 stated, "So with the younger people, I reach out through the Internet via Facebook and Instagram." Marketing is a valuable tool that could aid privately owned fashion boutique retailers to spread the word to customers on a specific product. Small business owners could use marketing strategies to find out the needs and wants of consumers by using various marketing techniques. The word cloud output from NVivo software indicated the participants focused on online presence for business operations and customer needs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Thematic derivation of participants' responses to Questions 1 through 8.

The analysis of these dominant and frequently articulated viewpoints from the semistructured interviews led to the discovery of central themes in terms of business strategies to combat the threat of online retailing. The themes that emerged after the analysis of the participants’ perspective, reflected how privately owned fashion boutique owners should use resources at their disposal to remain sustainable against major fashion retailers. Social media is virtually free and a technological option to enhance customer choice behavior by increasing awareness of a business, and it may serve traditional businesses to have an active online presence.

Theme 2: Fashion Trends

The second major theme that emerged from the data analysis was fashion trends. P1 expressed, “I keep up with the fashions and trends. But one thing about me, my accessories and merchandise that I try to buy products and fashion that is going to be sustainable.” P3 noted, “The industry is definitely changing as far as the style. I have to keep up with what is in style even though I might not necessarily like it. I am not a big fan of skinny jeans and tight pants, but that is what’s in style now. That is pretty much what everyone is looking for and I’ve got to kind of follow along with that.”

P4 expressed, “Typically, we are up to date with newer arrivals than online is and that is how brick and mortars are. I feel like there are more selections in the stores”. P5 noted, “Living in a college town, I have young customers also, but with a loyal base and having dressed four different generations, I have to have the new trendy looks plus a classic look for older ladies and establish the balance.” Some small business owners must keep up with the latest fashion trends based on customer needs and wants. Privately owned fashion boutiques must find ways to bring patrons into the store instead of shopping online. Hvass (2017) noted that there is a potential concern for high-fashion and low-fashion retailers with different perspectives toward maintainable retailing in the fashion business. The participant responses on the theme may denote the importance of keeping in tune with consumer trends and fashion based on the data collected. The second theme that emerged after using the qualitative analysis software was fashion. Five participants were involved in the study, which created 5.12% of theme frequency. While using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, the theme frequency from the qualitative data output and analysis was 50.

Theme 3: Customer Preference

The last major and important theme that emerged from the data collected from privately owned fashion boutique owners was customer preference. Small business owners must consider customer preference, choices, behavioral trends, and wants, and products that customers may not find online or in other boutiques. P2 expressed, “I try to keep things that are more moderate that people can buy a year from now and it is the same type of fashion”. P3 stated, Some of the stuff if you go to the mall, you won't see it in the mall. Especially like the pink dolphin, and it is certain brands that I know if I get, the people will come. Especially being in the store, they want to be able to look at it, feel it, and try it on.

P1 noted,

I try to see what they need, like when I know when there is going to be an anniversary coming up and I have a lot of church women that come in. I have a lot of people that come in for the derbies, so I know when the Kentucky Derby and Carolina Cup takes place.

P4 indicated "It is definitely going more towards online. People like instant gratification if it is in the store with your size, but a lot of time, the stores don't have your size". P5 mentioned,

You have to balance it with your customer age base—old and young—which I have a mixture. So, I buy certain styles for the older age and another style for the younger age [i.e., college students, high school students, and preteens], who want more of a trendy look.

Once again, greater use of technology may be evident in store owner expressions in the interviews. Traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners could use social media to get feedback from consumers about certain fashion trends, which could give insight about modifying certain trends to fit the needs of their current, desired, and prospective clientele. The word density cloud output from NVivo software indicated customer preference in favoring adaptation to business procedures and meeting the desires of patrons in fashion (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Thematic derivation from participants' responses regarding customer preference.

Minor Themes

Additional minor themes emerged from the data analysis, such as the importance of participating in community events and product shelf life, obsolescence, and products that are less affected by time. The first emerging minor theme was the importance of community events in marketing. All participants, except P2, mentioned giving back, hosting events, or sponsoring other organizations in the community to help in customer engagement. P1 noted, “I do fashion shows annually for my shop and other organizations like the 100 Black Women, which I have done 3 years in a row for their annual luncheon”.

P5 stated,

We offer in-store events, which we call it “Delighting the Customer.” We have events where we bring in speakers and other pop-up shops. We always try to have drinks, desserts, or something to make it a fun experience here.

Small business fashion retailers could participate in community and like events that offer an opportunity to also give back to the community and shows how much the business appreciates current and potential new patrons. Customers tend to usually reciprocate and favorably patronize companies that tend to give back within the community and being a sponsor to local schools or other organizations could help the business get their name out within the community. P4 expressed that, “In-store promotions that are only geared towards our audience like, the University. We have student discount days and medical Mondays, if you are in the medical field, you get a discount that day.” P3 mentioned

> Well, so far what I have done is like customer appreciation. Next month, I am doing a back to school bash (i.e., free backpacks, performance, snow cones, bouncy houses, and other stuff). That is pretty much my strategy to try to give back within the community and show my appreciation to the customers.

Small businesses play a vital role in the economy of a geographical location and giving back builds good community relationships with organizations, which could aid in promoting positive social change, while increasing business and economic viability and positive customer relationship building.

Another minor theme that emerged was the product shelf life of merchandise and how fashion boutiques manage products being on a shelf for a while. Each participant expressed that once a product has been on a shelf over a certain amount of days, then the merchandise is marked down and offered at a discounted price. People like to save money as well and would purchase a product at a discount price rather than the normal amount.

P4 noted,

We also go through and do markdowns once a month, even if it is a small markdown. Even if it's been hanging around, we try to move it to our sales section because saving money, people still like that and rather get a good deal than pay full price.

P5 stated, "In June, I have what I call a Moonlight Night Madness and it is open after hours and it is to my customer list, which gets kind of crazy in here and I liquidate some of my products".

P1 expressed,

I get something that may be on the shelf for a while and put it on sale. I put it on sale for 20% and then go from there. I have a 50% off rack that I have year-round and as the style trend out, like say I have summer styles and as we merge into fall and winter, I take everything around September or October that is still here from the summer, then put it on the 50% off rack.

P2 discussed, "Based on the months as for liquidation, I mean, once anything goes over 60-90 days, which is pretty much sale time. I really don't have an issue with any leftover stock." P3 noted, "Now, what I do is because I am here all the time and I see what's coming and going, I pretty much look at a piece and know that I had it too long, which I mark it down."

After the completion of the semistructured interviews, I also reviewed the sales and financial reports from the previous 5 years of each participant to triangulate as my secondary data. The sales report verified that the small business owners interviewed are remaining sustainable, however demonstrably innovate to address the reality of online retailing; and a review of the financial reports in the case of P2, P3, and P4 financial reports indicated steady financial performance for the first 2 years from business formation. Year 3 of the sales report of P2, P3, and P4 showed where the numbers started to gradually increase and continue to remain profitable each year thereafter. I also researched the National Retail Foundation, which was mentioned by P3 to provide validity within the study. After looking over the website, fashion boutique owners could use the website as a tool to help incorporate some strategies within the organization to stay abreast of current consumer and business trends, on what works or what does not work, to sustain smaller firms against larger retailers.

Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) showed an increase in retail stores even though fashion stores were still closing. The increase was more from smaller stores that have five employees or less, rather than larger retail stores. Small business owners are the mainstay of the economy and fashion boutiques must consider that there are no guarantees of being sustainable within the fast-changing retail industry. In the real world, small businesses must monitor consumer trends, display the ability to research, conduct due diligence, and monitor the competition. The careful and regular monitoring of industry data by small business owners of traditional fashion enterprises will undoubtedly provide insight into current and potential privately owned fashion boutique owners with greater business acuity and sustainability strategies. Due diligence and innovation thus help a business to be profitable even though some traditional brick-and-mortar stores are closing due to the rapid increase of online shopping.

Traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques must find alternative ways to help combat the continuous change within the fashion industry. The use of social media could play an integral part in business sustainability and provides an avenue for small business owners to reach out to current and potential customers. Zhang, Onal, and Das (2017) noted that many retailers are operating on two platforms: traditional brick-and-mortar and over the Internet to remain sustainable against other fashion retailers. There are some small business owners in the fashion industry that do not use both platforms and most of the sales come from consumers purchasing products within the store. Many traditional fashion retailers and brands have swiftly incorporated social media, as the goal for many are to reach out to customers on local and a global scale, thereby to market products and display cognizance to the latest trends by Ananda, Hernández-García, Acquila-Natale, and Lamberti (2019).

Technology is constantly changing and making some traditional small business fashion boutique owners adopt and adapt to new ways to remain profitable as online shopping continues to prosper. Amazon is taking the retail world by surprise and other fashion chains are becoming obsolete and forced to close doors. The technology could also have a negative impact when some consumers prefer the click of a mouse instead of purchasing inside a store. Patrons must, however, be aware of counterfeit items available over the Internet versus buying in a traditional store. Meraviglia (2018) noted, that when purchasing products online, consumers do not have the luxury to feel the fabric or try the product until delivered to the individual. Traditional brick-and-mortars have the advantage of products because customers would have the luxury to go try on or feel the product in the store instead of waiting days for the merchandise to arrive. Consumer choice behavior is another aspect in the retail industry that privately owned fashion boutique owners should consider as well and think about the wants and needs of the customers. Saifee (2017) stated that consumer choice behavior is based on how involved the consumer is with a particular store and the brands being sold. Consumers tend to shop in other places when one feels like they do not have a say on what to buy. The advantage that traditional brick-and-mortar stores have over online retailers is giving one-on-one interaction or feedback. When making purchases over the Internet, customers do not have that face-to-face interaction, which small business owners in the retail industry should use that to their greater advantage, which requires innovative ways by brick-and-mortar stores to acquire and retain customers, and therefore the astute leveraging of technology must not be ruled out.

Study Findings Through the Lens of the General Systems Theory

From the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, the frequently favored business strategies of privately owned fashion boutique owners, as articulated and incorporated by the participants, indicated a need for innovation to achieve business sustainability. The implementation of the three primary themes that emerged from the analysis appeared to be relevant when looking at the commonalities in strategies to negate the threat of online retailing. The data analysis in this research involved cautious use of data utilizing a method of continuous evaluation of participants’ responses, from which the central themes appeared, and signified the result of classifying all eight open-ended interview questions into three groups. Bertalanffy (1968) coined the GST, which was used as the conceptual framework that underpinned this study. Lamr and Skrbek (2017) noted that the lessons and the postulations of the GST could serve to decipher optimal strategies that face businesses to face and prevent complex issues, notably when components interact with one another. In the context of this study, hence from the standpoint of small and traditional fashion retailers, major retailers are making things complex for these small business fashion boutique owners because e-commerce shopping is increasing exponentially. Using the lens of the GST aided in recognizing strategies by the participating successful privately owned fashion boutique owners. The selected participants have used strategies to increase sustainability and profitability, wherein the first 5 years from inception is considered an important benchmark and a predictor of sustainability and survivability in an environment of increasing online consumer favorability.

The study findings from the collected data thus helped to identify critical business success factors related and congruent with the GST and explanations on how different elements can synergistically combine with varied and different elements, within the enterprise and externally. For instance, the fashion boutique owners confirmed that retaining customers, one-on-one customer interaction, and fashion trends are consistent with the GST. The overall outcome of this study was that creative, diverse, and tailored strategies are crucial for the fashion retail industry, reflecting on the ability to adapt and innovate within an environment where critical thinking skills and management is often the critical differentiator in becoming obsolete, or sustainable.

The results from the study in several ways mirrored the success of privately-owned fashion boutique owners. The findings also appeared congruent with the vital qualities and traits enunciated in the GST in respect of the imperatives or for cohesion and collaboration within a business and externally in relation to the business environment as well. From the data analysis, the clear inference is that diverse and creative approaches are necessary to combat online competition. Proactive and innovative strategies have also helped to overcome challenges and seemed to be the trademark of the interviewed fashion boutique owners in attaining continuous business profitability. The critical period of susceptible is usually the first 5 years from startup for privately owned fashion boutiques. The early years are when many small and medium-sized enterprises fail and survivability is an accomplishment, often exemplified by innovatively enacting and formulation business strategies to remain successful.

Applications to Professional Practice

The formulation of the strategies from the findings of the study could provide current and future fashion boutique owners ways to help counter the threat of online retailers. Reimers, Chao, and Gorman (2016) noted that online shopping could potentially satisfy many of the same hedonic motives endemic to brick-and-mortar shopping. Reimers, Chao, and Gorman also suggested, that successful brick-and-mortar companies could hence provide alternative ways to help other traditional fashion boutique owners remain sustainable to combat the ubiquitous, continuous, e-commerce industry which threatens traditional brick and mortar stores. The high failure rates of traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques and economic loss have been a concern for organizational leaders within the community, where this research study was undertaken.

The traditional and online operations of companies like Amazon and Walmart have caused traditional brick-and-mortar stores to close because consumers increasingly opt to make online purchases**.** Many small business owners have difficulties in competing with larger organizations, which usually have an online and traditional store presence. An omnichannel retailer could retain customers and who would otherwise possibly seek online retailer options (Bhatnagar & Syam, 2014). There also are pure brick-and-mortar retailers, pure online retailers, and retailers that operate in both capacities such as Walmart and Target.

I shared a two-page summary of the findings of this study with all participants, which has been well received. From a business sustainability perspective, it is critical for business owners to ensure profitability, or face the threat of becoming obsolete, as fashion purchase trends gravitate to online shopping. One of the principal reasons for fashion boutique closures is because some fail to step out of their comfort zone and innovatively compete with larger retailers. Privately owned fashion boutiques must have unique products to attract consumers and retain them as well and continue to combat the threat of online retailing through innovation.

Implications for Social Change

The study findings may contribute to positive social change by providing knowledge, conducive to improving business success, which may serve to increase the survivability of startups and thereby improve the welfare of small business boutique owners and the community. The knowledge and formulation of business strategies from this research could potentially contribute to increasing the profitable success of traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutique retailers, which bodes well for the community. The economic success of privately owned fashion traditional retailers would likely contribute to the creation of jobs in the community in the geographical vicinity of the store. The profitability of these businesses would thereby likely contribute to positive social change, more prosperous traditional brick-and-mortar retailer communities in the southeast United States.

Traditional brick-and-mortar small business fashion boutique owners, therefore, may have the ability with the implementation of innovative customer-oriented strategies, which would also likely contribute to positive social change within the community, as increased customer traffic in a physical store increases economic prosperity and therefore also enrich the community, in greater measure than online retailers which are often staffed by a smaller staff. Privately owned fashion retail owners can also further contribute to increasing positive social change within the community also by indulging in community engagement. Participating in different social events offers many innovative possibilities and options.

Recommendations for Action

The study findings may serve to highlight some of the important challenges encountered by privately owned fashion boutique owners. The study results may additionally provide insights into the necessary and important aspects of meeting customer needs, leveraging social media, and thus advance the business experience. Trust is also often established in greater measure from the rapport built from the face-to-face interaction with the customer, (Liu, 2018) and making the consumer return to the brick-and-mortar store is a compelling advantage that must be leveraged advantageously in this setting and domain.

The results presented in this study on implementing the successful strategies by traditional small fashion businesses may be important to other traditional fashion boutique owners and commercial entities facing similar challenges from online competitors. The following are some recommendations derived from the analysis of the themes, which emerged from the responses of the participants, which could aid the advancement of the aspirations of small business fashion boutiques seeking to remain profitable while competing against online competitors. Integrating strategies used by successful traditional brick-and-mortar business owners could aid in the understanding of how to remain sustainable in the face of an increasing presence of online retailers:

Building customer rapport: This recommendation for action means that business owners can expect positive outcomes with innovating, understanding consumer trends and striving to deliver greater and superior customer service. The aim must be to retain and attract new consumers by building greater rapport with new and potential future patrons who come into the store to shop, to garner greater loyalty that could encourage customers to return to purchase more products.

Customer retention: Another recommendation for action is that fashion boutique owners’ frequent one-on-one interaction with their customers and build lifetime customer value and rapport so that consumers traffic displays an increasing appreciation and satisfaction of the services offered.

Social media: The recommendation is for privately owned fashion boutiques to leverage technology and increase the use of social media as a platform to help promote and advertise products. Utilizing a physical store presence advantageously can be a decided advantage as many customers like to experience and try a product and avoid delays in product arrivals and the associated shipping time and costs involved in online retail purchases.

Good customer service: A final recommendation, implicit in the previous recommendations, is that privately owned fashion boutique owners will likely derive financial and business gains when providing a memorable purchase experience for customers and making the entire experiences one that will garner loyalty.

Recommendations for Further Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to negate the threat of online retailers. The study findings may aid in shedding some light on the sparse information about how traditional small business fashion retailers use strategies to help combat the threat from online competition. A limitation within the study was the geographical location, which I recommend expanding the research to other regions of the United States, perhaps using a quantitative approach and a larger sample size may also yield greater understanding of business strategies and imperatives for these kinds of businesses. The narrow geographical location may hinder acquiring insight into other strategies that could be useful to address online retailing. As may be expected in a qualitative study, restricted a geographical location, the study results would only perhaps be applicable to the region of the United States where the study was undertaken and not therefore universally transferrable to other locations and states. I recommend researchers look at other industries besides the small business retail fashion boutiques while finding alternative ways to develop strategies to address online retailing, by those who have physical stores.

In undertaking similar qualitative research studies, a recommendation is for future researchers to schedule semistructured interviews in a timely manner. I also recommend future researchers to consider other data sources that could aid in collecting data like observations of the participants or focus groups, to glean a breadth of strategic options. Another recommendation would be to ensure that the study participant is comfortable during the interview process so that the setting is conducive to eliciting detail insights and best practices.

Further research could provide insights into small business fashion boutique owners on how one incorporates the use of social media to help promote products or receive feedback from consumers. Some privately owned fashion retail owner may use methods such as ads, or the use of a consumer call list to reach out to patrons and keep them current about new fashion trends, to learn of their preferences, needs and buying patterns. Traditional business owners and online competitors would likely reap greater economic dividends by instituting loyalty programs, as may be feasible to retain customers.

Reflections

I started this journey about 3 and a half years ago and wanted to become the first in my immediate family to earn a doctoral degree. While still serving in the military, I wanted to be an inspiration to others that you can achieve anything when you stay focused and put your mind on doing something. Throughout the journey, I had to overcome various obstacles that tried to hinder my accomplishment. My passion for teaching began when I started working with a nonprofit organization as a tutor. My overall goal is to be a college professor, however; I did not possess a teaching certificate or any licensure. I decided to obtain a DBA to make a difference within the community and get help open doors on becoming a college instructor. After the completion of the DBA program, the knowledge and experience with research will undoubtedly help aid in assisting other businesses within my geographical location to improve the welfare of the community. Another area that interested me, was the fact that many local businesses are becoming obsolete as companies such as Amazon continues to dominate the e-commerce world. Some traditional brick-and-mortar stores are having a difficult time to compete with online purchases. For privately owned fashion boutique business owners, the threat of online retailing is a reality and it is important for local brick-and-mortar stores to remain sustainable, with innovation holding the key to business sustainability.

During the prospectus and proposal process, there were times where it became frustrating and I wanted to push forward and start my research. I persevered and stayed motivated and positive. Having a great support system helped as well, as I have built relationships with my mentor and previous and current classmates, which helps keep each other motivated so that we are part of this winning team together.

I was the data collection instrument for this study and one of the challenges was to avoid personal biases when I started to recruit participants to participate in this research study. I personally delivered the consent form to all potential participants and provided a copy for their records. Once a participant agreed to be in the study, the signing of the consent forms ensured that there were copies for participants and personal records. I used the interview protocol to ask the carefully developed questions of each participant in the order to avoid personal biases and ensure the data collected were the responses of the participants.

I noticed that during the recruitment of participants, some fashion boutique owners did not want to partake in the study after the purpose of it was explained. I made contact personally with mostly the managers and left the consent form to be given to the business owner to review and acknowledge if one wanted to participate or decline. Other privately owned fashion boutique owners were willing to participate, the overall process of completing the scheduled interviews took about a month. After about reaching out to two or three potential participants, I started noticing that some fashion boutique owners would say that they would get back to me, but no contact was made once I left the store. When conducting a study, researchers must be humble and avoid negativity. Individuals often do not want to participate in a study, for fear that it could bring exposure to the company. Assuring confidentiality and reinforcing the academic purpose of the study, in contributing to business knowledge, proved useful in gaining participant trust.

Conclusion

There are various resources that privately owned small fashion boutique owners could use to be sustainable and compete with major fashion retailers like Walmart, Target, and Amazon. Some of the resources are networking with other small business fashion boutiques, attending fashion shows, or searching the National Retail Foundation website to stay current with the latest fashion trends. Community events or being a sponsor to other social causes and non-profit organizations could help privately owned fashion boutiques to gain greater community exposure while giving back to the public.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

A. Introduce self to the participant.

B. Verify receipt of the consent form; answer any questions or concerns from the participant.

C. Get confirmation and acknowledgment that the interview is being recorded.

D. Turn on the hand-held audio recording device.

E. Start the interviews with the first question and continue to the last question.

F. Observe the participant and take notes of non-verbal cues.

G. Per the participant's request, summarize the interview questions as needed.

H. Ask follow-up questions, if applicable.

I. Conclude interview and discuss schedule follow-up member checking the interview with the participant.

J. Thank the participant for partaking in the study. Confirm the participant has contact information for follow up questions or concerns.

K. End protocol.

Interview Questions

1. How do you monitor retail trends and formulate customer-oriented sales strategies against online retailers?

2. What strategies do you utilize to retain customers and attract new consumers from online competition and other offline retail stores?

3. How has the fashion industry changed and how those changes were managed?

4. How do you manage changing seasons with fashion and new trends from online retailers?

5. How do traditional fashion retailers compete with online retailers who do not hold large inventories?

6. What are some strategies you will implement to gain a competitive advantage from online retailers?

7. How do you track the success of strategies that you incorporate?

8. What strategies and imperatives for traditional fashion retailers to compete successfully with online retailers have we not discussed?