An Autoethnographic Approach to Examining Electronic Retail Development

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Corinna Budnarowska
Bournemouth University
School of Services Management
Talbot Campus
Poole
Dorset
BH12 5BB
UK
Phone : 01202 965579
Email : cbud@bournemouth.ac.uk

Ruth Marciniak
London Metropolitan University
Londonmet Business School
North Campus
Stapleton House
277-281 Holloway Road
London N7 8HN
UK
Phone: 020 7133 3365
Email: r.marciniak@londonmet.ac.uk

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Abstract

Autoethnographic approaches to doing research in retailing are rare. Through the researcher reflecting on and analysing her own personal experiences as a fashion retail store proprietor, this study reconstructed the process of her strategic decision making with regard to moving from selling fashion goods via an independent high street store to selling online. The study is concerned with the issues surrounding the adoption of electronic retail (e-tail) development. In doing so, the study reviewed the various development models that exist within e-commerce literature, and in particular, examined the extent to which they are relevant to e-tail development. Hence the study's contribution to advances in retailing is in the field of strategic decisions pertaining to electronic retailing. Specifically the aim of the study was to either confirm or adjust the models within e-commerce literature that describe the internet adoption process.

Through the adoption of an autoethnographical approach, the study acknowledges that there is a complex interdependency between the researcher and the researched and thereby utilises subjective experience as an intrinsic part of the research process. This is achieved through offering the retail proprietor's 'insider' perspective based upon both self narratives and self observations.

Whilst the author's acknowledge that the subject of the study needs to be examined in a broader sense, beyond the self generated data presented in the study, they argue that such self introspections can be considered as a basis of useful, albeit non-scientific, knowledge in itself. The results of the study indicate that e-commerce business models currently evident within literature are either prescriptive in nature or alternatively, based upon empirical evidence, describe a company's e-commerce planning. Such descriptions are limited in that they are unique to the company under investigation.

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Introduction

As the importance of e-commerce increases, so does the need to understand the mechanisms by which e-commerce is developed within retailing. A number of retailers have made the transition from selling via the high street to moving online either through adopting a multi-channel strategy or, in some instances, abandoning their high street presence to sell entirely via a virtual environment (for example, Littlewoods). Selling via a web site is an attractive proposition for fashion retailers as there is growing evidence that more consumers are choosing to shop for fashion online (Mintel, 2008). Indeed, clothing offers a number of aspects that make them well suited to this medium. Firstly, there is already a strong precedent for home shopping for clothes via mail order, for example, mail order brands including Freemans, Grattan, Look Again and Kaleidoscope. Secondly, the use of photography, video and sound technology offer a compelling channel for selling fashion goods (Beck, 2001). In addition to this, according to Ebay a piece of clothing sells every seven seconds on their site (Morrell, 2006). In all, whilst online clothing retailing was slow to take off, there are now few fashion retailers who lack a transactional website

(Mintel, 2008).

To date, there is a growing body of academic interest in electronic retail development (Weltevreden, 2005). However such studies are limited to the examination of large retailers (Doherty et al., 2006). In all, there has been little attention paid to independent retailers (Weltevreden, 2005), or indeed SMEs. In addition, fashion e-tailing has attracted some attention, however much of this work has been limited to the examination of consumer behaviour issues (e.g. Goldsmith & Flynn, 2005; Kim & Kim, 2004). Literature focusing on a fashion retailer's e-commerce development is much less common.

Adopting a case study approach, this paper examines existing models of e-commerce development and evaluates to what extent these models can be applied to a small independent retailer operating within the UK fashion retail sector.

The outline of the paper is as follows; the following section explores the motivation for e-commerce adoption. Following this, various views on the process of strategy development are presented. Next, development models of e-commerce are examined and analysed. The methodology of the research is subsequently offered, followed by the case study results and analysis. The paper then offers conclusions together with directions for future research.

Motivation for E-commerce Adoption

The rapid growth of e-commerce has led to a number of studies on the adoption and use of it by organisations (Shih, 2008). Such studies have included a company's examination of the motivating factors influencing the decisions to adopt e-commerce and also the process of adoption of the technology itself. Motivating factors have been identified in the work of Daniel and Grimshaw (2002) who identified four categories of factors that influenced e-commerce adoption, these being, competition, customers, suppliers and internal operations. Competition in terms of the behaviour of competitors was seen as significant in that it was perceived that a lack of adoption of e-commerce would lower a company's competitive position. In terms of customers, it was perceived that companies could enhance their service provision through e-commerce, for example, through the interaction that web sites provide. With regards to suppliers, it was perceived that through e-commerce improved communication could be achieved with suppliers and also e-commerce facilitated both identification of new suppliers and improved purchasing terms. Finally, companies perceive that improved internal operations in terms of cost savings and improved internal communication can be achieved via e-commerce technologies.

Given that competition is primarily a process of the creation and diffusion of new knowledge (Schumpeter, 1934), the consequence of such is to compel businesses to adjust rapidly to follow in the innovation/imitation cycle, which is based on learning, innovation and imitation (Shih, 2008). The diffusion of innovation is a process in which innovation is spread through a population of potential adopters (Rogers, 1983), either through external or internal influences. The motivating factors that encourage the adoption of the innovation are identified as being either rationalism, bandwagon pressure or forced choice (Silveira, 2001). Rationalism refers to the motivation to provide market leadership and keep up with competitors. Alternatively, bandwagon pressure is identified by Silveira (2001) as being a means by which organisations adopt an innovation to imitate their direct competitors. Finally, institutional agents relate to the influence of customers and/or suppliers to adopt an innovation. Given that both competitors and institutional agents have an influence on the adoption of innovation then the contagion model of social

network analysis can be used to explain the diffusion of technological innovation (Burt, 1987). This model purports that since adopting an innovation is risky due to the unknown costs and benefits that may be accrued, then businesses will draw upon others to identify what is the socially acceptable interpretation of the associated risks. Exploring the contagion model within the context of e-commerce, Shih (2008) identified that adoption of e-commerce by businesses derives more from adoption by their competitors through imitation in order to pursue competitive advantage than from adoption by supply-chain partners as an assimilative process for seeking identification with each other.

Strategic Decision Making Processes

Critical to the effectiveness of a company's strategic decisions is considered to be a well-developed internal decision-making capability (Elbanna and Child, 2007). In addition, it is recognised that effective decisions are those that draw upon a diversity of knowledge to identify such things as new market opportunities, customer needs, competitive behaviour and critical resources (Hambrick, 2007). Therefore an important challenge for decision makers is to effectively integrate and apply reliable information into the company's decision making process. However, whilst acknowledging the importance of information in influencing decisions that are made, the strategic behaviour of the decision maker or makers also needs to be considered. To this end, a number of different configurations of strategic behaviour are offered within literature. For instance, Ansoff's (1987) framework of planning modes in which he identifies four types of strategic planning: organic model; reactive model; ad hoc
management model; and systematic management model. Ansoff's (1987) main contribution to strategic decision making literature is that he has shown that strategic behaviour is shaped by two main influences: the environment of the organisation and its internal capabilities.

Alternatively, Idenburg (1993) identifies two essential dimensions in strategic decision making, these being, goal orientation and process orientation. Goal orientation referring to the 'what' of strategy, and process orientation referring to the 'how' of strategy. To this end, Idenburg (1993) published a study identifying four distinct styles of strategy development, these being,rational planning; planning as a guided learning process; logical incrementalism; and emergent strategy (Figure 1). Each of these alternative views are examined in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Insert Figure 1 here

Rational planning
Rational planning is a form of strategy making that is concerned with the development and formulation of attainable objectives (Idenburg, 1993). Therefore this form of planning is strong on goal orientation. It assumes that the world is a predictable place, wherein the future position of a company can be determined in terms of its objectives (Eisenhardt & Zbaracki, 1992). Formal planning processes are evident and individuals act in a structured and rational manner (Ansoff, 1965). The approach to decision making advocates a comprehensive and exhaustive analysis of all information available prior to a decision being made. However, whilst grounded in analysis and identified as being strong in terms of focus on objectives, rational planning is often criticised for being too simplistic (Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999). For this reason, this planning style is condemned as being weak as the models offered, in terms of guidance on how to plan (for example Porters Five Forces), do not accommodate intuition, beliefs or values of those making the decision.

Guided learning
Alternatively, the planning as guided learning approach assumes that strategy making is a never ending process of continuous improvement (Idenburg, 1993). This style of planning is understood to be weak in goal orientation as, rather than strategy developing through the formulation of deliberate goals, strategy is seen as a never ending process of continuous adaption, wherein the production of mental models and insights are jointly acquired by the decision makers within the organisation. The outcome being a unified perspective (Mintzberg et al., 1998). In all, the business is understood to be a 'learning organisation' (de Geus, 1988) and therefore is understood to be strong on process. However, also for this reason, this style of planning is criticised for a focus on mental models rather than action (Idenburg, 1993).

Logical Incrementalism
Logical incrementalism acknowledges that the process of making strategy develops in phases, wherein a following phase is built upon a previous phase. In this way, analysis and action are successive steps in which goals are steered depending upon the previous analysis and action. For this reason this style of planning is understood to be both strong on both goal orientation and process (Idenburg, 1993). In all, it is logical that a manager may proceed flexibly and experimentally (Quinn, 1980). Therefore managers may not wait until they have acquired complete knowledge; rather they may manage by 'weak signals' (Ansoff & McDonnell, 1990). This being the case, they will begin their response to opportunities or threats whilst still in the process of either building up appropriate competences and/or, understanding the basis of the opportunities available to them within the external environment.

Emergent
The emergent view of the strategy planning process is understood to be both weak on goal orientation and weak on process (Idenburg, 1993). In terms of goal orientation, writers such as Mintzberg (1987) consider that it is impossible to develop explicit objectives due to the environment being unpredictable. Rather, it is necessary to react in a flexible and opportunistic manner to new developments occurring in the environment. Decision making is understood to be something that is shaped by the strategist who knows or learns how to work with the strategic situation in which goals evolve over time.

Examining Idenburg's (1993) contribution to strategic decision making theory, his typology shows the complexity and variety of different types of strategy decision making, in relation to different contexts as determined by levels of unpredictability and change in the external environment as well as the influence of people and their interactions. Idenburg (1993) concludes in his work that whilst all four of his visions of the strategy development process and decision making contain 'a grain of truth', emphasis on which vision is most appropriate will change over time "*depending on the external and internal necessity on the one hand and the insight and preference of the managers of the strategy process on the other*" (Idenburg, 1993:137). However as can be seen in the following section, the various development models of e-commerce identified within literature exhibit a variety of the visions presented by Idenburg.

Development Models of E-commerce

Rational approaches to e-commerce development
Development models of e-commerce predominantly offer a rational planning approach. For example, Shah and Dawson's (2001) approach includes the use of cost benefit analysis and SWOT analysis. Likewise Van Hooft and Stegwee (2001) also recommend using a SWOT analysis together with 5 forces analysis in the development of e-commerce. In addition, various explanatory models exist that offer a stepwise approach to explain how the internet may be

adopted by an organisation. For instance, Siomkos and Vrechopoulos (2002) prescribe a step-by-step systematic approach to strategy planning in e-commerce. Likewise, Corbitt's (2000) work, based upon a case study of one financial institution, offers stages of e-commerce development commencing with the organisation of an e-commerce group and development of the need for adoption of e-commerce. Later stages include consultancy and identification of barriers to implementation. The final stage is the production of a report and formal adoption of the e-commerce strategy.

The above models, which draw upon the use of strategy tools, offer a prescriptive approach to strategy decision making, rather than grounded in careful observation of what works and what does not work in practice. In addition, none acknowledge that strategy process planning may be something other than rational. Further to this, it is ironic that these models support a rational approach to e-commerce planning given that at the same time that they were being produced much emphasis on e-commerce was on entrepreneurial management styles, experimentation and rapid change (Daniel and Wilson, 2001).

However whilst strategy tools provide a rational means of planning they can also serve to check out whether the 'gut feel' of an idea matches the reality of, for example, the marketplace (Hayashi, 2001) and therefore may be employed in guided learning, emergent or incremental planning processes. To this end, Daniel and Wilson (2001) advocate an organisational culture wherein people can experiment and learn and take an 'options' approach to planning. This is supported by Plant (2000) who identifies organisational learning as a key factor in e-commerce success.

Alternative approaches to e-commerce development
Alternatives to rational approaches to e-commerce development are evident within literature. Such alternatives include logical incrementalism. For example, in terms of SMEs, Daniel et al.'s (2002) empirical work proposed that adoption of e-commerce also evolves as a number of sequential stages. Each of these stages identified is dependent on a set of contextual variables, both at an industry and organisational level. Their work endorses earlier work by Frank (1988) and Dosi (1988) who both suggest that the achievement of a first stage of a project allows a business to gain experience that can then be utilised in order for it to move on to the next stage of development.

Alternatively, McBride (1997) prescribes an e-commerce development approach that blends both rational and incremental planning approaches. To this end, he recommends that specifications should be written and development plans established together with an opportunity and benefits analysis undertaken. However, whilst he suggests that planning should not be ad hoc, he recommends that an incremental approach to the expansion of Internet applications ensures that appropriate culture change can occur, and in this sense, "such strategy itself will be dynamic and evolving" (McBride,1997:66). However, Mcbride's model was not empirically tested.

Approaches to e-tail development
With specific reference to e-commerce and electronic retailing, Costanzo (2004) explored the concept of experimentation in strategy planning within electronic retail banking. Her results indicate that the company adopted a strategy planning process that involved "institutionalising a process of continuous learning by mistakes". This finding is captured in the following quote:

"Through this process of learning the managers did not avoid the uncertainty of the future. But, they just probed it on a regular basis, by institutionalising internal experimentation, monitoring the

external environment, establishing intelligent networks, and strategic partnerships". (Costanzo, 2004:6)

In all, Costanzo (2004) provides empirical evidence that strategy planning within electronic retailing involves guided learning.

Further empirical work is offered by Ashworth et al. (2006a) who also indicate that e-commerce development within electronic retailing is not a rational process. Through their research, they offer a model, which exclusively focuses upon SME fashion retailers wherein fives stages of the development of a fashion electronic retail web site are identified. These stages include: develop a web presence with focus on profitability; develop information competence; develop value integration and creative market development; enhance integration of skills, processes and technologies and finally; leverage experience, learning and knowledge to maximise business value. Ashworth et al. (2006a) describe a time scale in which the case study company investigated moved through its various stages.

Ashworth et al. (2006a; 2006b) confirm Constanzo's (2004) work, as they too argue that as time progresses, learning curve prospects for web site development increase thereby providing opportunities for building skills, knowledge and expertise, which ultimately culminates in multi-niche operations for a number of small independent fashion pure play retailers, or what the researchers refer to as web-weaving. The term web-weaving describes an organisation, who have exploited their culminated learning from one web site to launch subsequent web sites, often across divergent niches. Profit derived from the first web site is used to support the development of other sites.   Benefits cited by Ashworth et al. (2006b) include the generation of multiple revenue streams, incremental economies of scale and service-based differentiation.

Reviewing the models identified above and revisiting Idenburg's (1993) four views on the process of strategy development, the various models can fit into the various views (Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 here

Criticism of the models offered
Common to all the models outlined above is the suggestion that there is a linear or step wise approach to the development of e-commerce. However such a conception may be problematic. For instance, Kai-Uwe Brock (2000) indicates that attempts to use linear models oversimplify complex issues and circumstances. Therefore the application and effectiveness of such models is questioned as they may not be helpful in reflecting how process really occurs. For instance, Supri et al. (2000) suggest that effective adoption and implementation of internet technologies may rely more on individual factors such as organisational size, structure and mix of available resources and social interactions with others outside the organisation, for example, suppliers, customers and competitors.

Ashworth et al.'s (2006a) model offers timescales for each of the various stages. One could argue this aspect of the model is useful for retail practitioners in terms of guidance for how long they should be at each of the stages. However, given that each retailer is unique in terms of the bundle of resources accessible to them, the model could also be criticised in terms of its usefulness in application to other companies. In addition, Ashworth's (2006a) empirical work was captured at one point in time therefore the timescales offered may not be appropriate for other retailers at the initial stages of their own e-commerce development at another point in time.

In addition, with regards to all the models offering a step wise approach to e-commerce development, one could question whether all the stages in the process are necessary. For example, could a retailer operate multi-niche web sites from the outset, or are all the stages experienced? For example, do all web site retailers ultimately end up as multi-niche operators, or alternatively, is focus on profit an inevitability right from the start? In all, by determining the relationship between e-commerce development and the extent to which the adoption process is linear, a contribution to e-tailing and strategy planning theory is made.

Research Methodology

In order to examine e-commerce development and the extent to which e-tailers fit into existing models of adoption offered, the objectives of the survey were:

- To establish the retailer's motivation and thinking with regards to the initial development of e-commerce.
- To examine the retailer's goal and process orientation in terms of strategy planning with regard to their e-commerce development, including the rationality of the planning process, learning and the existence of both emergent and incremental planning.
- To evaluate to what extent existing models of e-commerce development are appropriate to describe e-commerce development within an SME fashion retailer.

Data for the study was drawn from one small independent retailer, based in Bournemouth, UK. This retailer was worthy of a single case study investigation as firstly, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. Ashworth et al., 2006a), compared with online grocery retailing wherein a number of academic studies have been based (e.g. Boyer & Hult, 2005); fashion retail involvement in e-commerce is under investigated.

In addition, despite their numbers in the UK market (Mintel, 2008), fashion independents are largely ignored within current academic literature. Secondly, whilst high street multiple retailers moving into multi-channel environments have attracted much research interest (Doherty et al., 2006), there is a lack of research into small retailers who have moved in this direction, and in this case, transferred their business to being solely a pure-play retailer. A company profile of the retailer is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Altogether, two in-depth, face-to-face interviews were carried out with key personnel, the owners, within the case study company. Primary data was collected through recorded, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. The questions asked were based upon themes that were drawn out from the four different views of strategy planning presented by Idenburg (1993). These included motivation for e-commerce development, identification of goals and objectives and the planning processes incurred. In particular, the researchers noted the extent to which the planning was rational, incremental and/or emergent, together with evidence of learning.

Standard practices advocated by Miles and Huberman (1994) for qualitative data analysis were used, which involved the collation of data organised under the headings of the identified themes described above. Once collected, tapes of each of the interviews were transcribed. Each interview lasted on average one to two hours. The case study interviews were carried out in August 2007 at the location convenient to the interviewees in Bournemouth, UK.

On the initial investigation of the literature dealing with the subject area of the research, it became apparent that the essence of the subject under examination was directly related to the personal experience of one of the researchers. Who better to tell the 'story' than a participant in it? It then became palpable to the researchers to undertake the primary research from an (auto)ethnographic perspective. (Auto) ethnography examines the role of the researcher as an active participant, or what Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) refer to as the 'research instrument'. Adopting this approach, "the data are seen as created in and through interactions that occur between the researcher and people in the field" (Brewer, 2000). Rather than, presenting a distanced, scientific and objective account, alternatively, the account captured recognises the subjective reality of the experiences (Pole & Morrison, 2003). This view is reinforced by Davies (1999) who identifies the aim of reflexive ethnography as being to "seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilise subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research". Hence the method draws upon the insiders perspective and whilst the approach to data capture has been criticised as being self absorbed and narcissistic (Davies, 1999; Vryan, 2006; Burnier, 2006), Anderson (2006) suggests such criticism may be overcome as the research "calls for dialogue with "data" or "others"".

The case study was able to be examined through an (auto) ethnographic approach through the use of both an 'insider', the 'participant', who was responsible for the e-commerce development and an 'outsider', the non-participant, who was an academic. To this end, the non-participant brought an element of 'objectivity' and 'contextualisation' (Corbitt, 2000) that richened the experience and prompted a greater depth of reflection from the participant. The non-participant offers up the existing theory to be discussed, and the participant is then able to discuss the relevance of this theory to their own experiences.

The researchers also considered that the methodology used, in terms of the interview process that took place, lent itself to 'narrative analysis' by the 'outsider'. The 'outsider' encourages the 'insider' to 'tell their story', enabling the listener ('outsider') to be 'pulled in' and understand 'why' the entrepreneur (the 'insider') behaved the way they did, as opposed to just the 'how' and 'what' of their experience (Fletcher, 2007). This type of 'interpretive study' was considered to be appropriate when considering an entrepreneurial journey, because it acknowledges that strategy can often be 'socially constructed' (Walsham, 1993).

This method of data capture is both unique in the field of both strategy development research, which has been criticised for adopting a predominantly functionalist approach (Gummerson, 2000), and also in the field of e-commerce strategy planning research, which Doherty and Ellis-Chadwick (2006) acknowledge is an under researched area in itself, as the literature tends to focus on e-commerce strategy content. In all, the researchers considered that the approach adopted would offer both a "value-added quality" and an "added vantage point" to the subject area. It is the authors' intention that the primary research be a "journey of discovery", promoting the "generation of concepts and/or theories"; a pragmatic approach to research (Pole & Morrison, 2003).

Limitations identified in this study are that the data was derived from one case company only and therefore it would be inappropriate to draw any wider conclusions from the results. Consequently, for the future, further exploration of additional retailers is necessary. Nevertheless, for this study, the choice of company allowed the researchers to capture a rich, in-depth story of e-commerce development.

Results

In this section, we present the rich descriptions, afforded by adopting an autoethnographical approach, of the personal biographies of the owners of the fashion retail company.

Motivation for e-tail adoption
Firstly, the motivation for developing an e-tail arm of the business was concerned with expansion. The owner identified that the attraction of selling goods online was "*having another store without the responsibility of having another store*", that is, another physical store. Such a statement infers that for the owners, selling online was a more manageable option in terms of internal operations than a second retail outlet. Enhancement of customer service provision was not seen as a motivation as online customers were perceived to be a different type of customer. For example, the owner indicated that "*our high street business was built on regulars and our personal relationship with our customers*". However, at the time of developing the web site, they did not envisage such a personal relationship being achieved with their online customers. Further to this, behaviour of competitors or potential for improved communications with their suppliers was not seen as motivating factors for the e-tail development.

In terms of applying Silveira's (2001) motivating factors for adopting innovation, rationalism was the driving force as the owners were motivated to strive for market leadership. At the beginning the owners were doubtful with regards to the potential success of selling clothes online, due to various negative media attention at the time in 2001. For instance, an example one of the owners cited was the attention paid to the clothing company Boo.com, wherein the founders lacked basic business skills and overspent on marketing and IT in the belief that they would achieve growth. A further reason they were doubtful about was a lack of business knowledge of selling via a website, as at that time, there were no successful business models or examples of best practice available.

However they identified that the few online retailers that existed were not offering alternative or cult fashion brands. Whereas at the time of thinking about an e-tail development, the owners had identified brands that were being sold via American ebay, which no retailers were stocking online from either the UK or Europe. Therefore seeing this gap, they identified a clear goal for an e-tail initiative. With regards to bandwagon pressure, this was not identified as a motivating factor. Rather, given the media negativity, the owners perceived that within the fashion market bandwagon pressure did not exist. This is summed up by a statement made, *¨In fact if I had followed the crowd I would not have ventured into e-tail at all, I think.¨*

In terms of institutional agencies and the relevance of Burt's (1987) contagion model, the owners drew upon an informal network of other small business entrepreneurs, many of whom were suppliers who had small fashion brand labels who were also retailing their own brands in some way, sometimes via the internet, for example via ebay. The owners stated that *¨They were all keen to see our progress and information was shared two-ways, rather naively I guess. There was a small element of competition in the market, but we did not consider it to be doing the sector justice and arrogantly believed we could offer a better range and overall customer experience¨.* For the owners, the major platform for networking was Fashion Capital, a government fashion portal whose remit is to encourage the exchange of news and contacts. As the company's IT expert was contracted to create their web site, the owners were able to exploit the networking opportunities that it opened up.

Other institutional agencies such as competitors were not identified as influencing the owners in

setting up their web site. As the owners indicated *¨there were a handful, but they were not thought to be enough of a threat to deter us. At that time, fashion e-tail was relatively 'easy' in terms of the lack of competitors. Although the potential customer base was very small and niche back at the start of the 00's, we quickly realised that if you had something that this niche wanted, then you could pretty much guarantee sales. This changed between 2001-2005 though, when the market became much more competitive and the major fashion retailers started to take an interest – large retailers were very much the followers in this market; it was the SMEs that were the early-adopters on the whole and drove change in the market¨.*

Strategic decision making processes
There is much evidence to suggest that the owners' e-tail development fits best with Idenburg's (1993) guided learning style of strategy development. For instance, in terms of the SME being strong with regard to process orientation, learning is evidenced in the following points:

Merchandise strategy and customer relationship management
The SME business was built on regular customers coming into the store. Therefore, developed, personal relationships had been built up with a core customer base. This allowed the owners knowledge of what these customers would buy. For instance, the owners working directly with customers in the high street store had the benefit of experiencing and gauging initial reactions to a fashion collection when the customer first sees it, that is, "*the wow factor"* from the customer. Alternatively, access to this kind of understanding is not accessible in an online environment and in turn, the owners considered lack of such understanding was "*detrimental in terms of me physically merchandising stock online".* However the owners have learnt to understand their customers better through tracking them online. An example of this includes, "*seeing what search phrases' customers put in",* referring to the search box on the SME's website and to the search engine results. Whilst they may be buying products online but not telling the owners 'why' they are buying ("*high street store customers can be quite frank"*), the owners learnt to adapt their merchandising strategy accordingly to buying online. For example, the owners pointed out that "*I can buy all black merchandise, but I could not do that in a physical store"* also *"There are things that sell well on the internet that wouldn't sell well in a store. We discovered over time that we were able to offer a far more diverse product range online that would have only served to have looked confused in a physical store – you can mix up styles and price points much more discreetly online.¨* Thereby indicating that buying and merchandising online requires a different understanding that needs to be learnt. Indeed by 2004, when making buying decisions, the SME "*consciously bought with a view to selling our products online as oppose to our product selection being based upon the physical shop stock collection*". More latterly, they would only take brands that they could sell both on and offline.

In addition, overtime the owners have learnt that having a relationship with the customer can be achieved. This learning has taken place as a result of better understanding of customer analytics and profiling. For instance, the owners stated that "*I can know to the day when a certain customer of mine will buy her hair dye. Having an understanding of this enabled us to see that it would make a huge difference to our business".* In turn, this understanding gave the owners confidence that they could make a success of selling online. Such customer relationships have extended globally, for at the time of initially developing e-tail the owners did not anticipate the amount of global traffic that they have received.

Marketing strategy
The owners admitted that "*marketing from the start was not a consideration. We did nothing to*

push ourselves." However over time they learnt that the relevance of search engines to any online marketing activities quickly became a consideration. In addition, marketing development came about through using affiliates. This was achieved through employing an affiliate consultant. As a consequence, the owners first understood that they did have an online market for their brands as within the first month of using affiliates, their sales increased by two thirds.   For this reason they then started to engage in greater marketing efforts. Learning that took place included search engine optimisation, which according to the owners, "*You don't really understand about optimal web layout, aesthetics and use of words until you have an understanding of search engine optimisation.*" To this end, the web site was completely redesigned in 2003, which included improved product and sizing information and back-end operations. In addition, in 2005, the retail site name was rebranded, which led to further increases in web site optimisation. Eventually a budget was dedicated for online marketing.

Other learning that took place included a better understanding of promotion in specific regard to their local market and the avoidance of cannibalisation between the physical and online store. For example, at the start of the e-tail development, charges for deliveries were not made, "*However some local customers would buy from us online knowing that they did not have to pay for delivery and therefore saved themselves the bus fare coming into the town centre.*" As learning progressed and, in addition, the SME decided to move to more upmarket merchandise, different postage charges were experimented with.

Strategic integration of physical store and online retail operations
From the start, the owners stated that the web site was always understood to be an add-on to the high street store business rather than "*a complement to the shop*", that is, "*we didn't own a shop that had a virtual outlet.*" It was noted by the authors at this point that, ironically, that is now the way that the market is heading, with the popularisation of such sites as 'Second Life'.

In order to understand the Internet market, accounts were kept separate and the owners tracked percentage splits. In addition, when the site was first launched, credit card details were dealt with manually and internet sales were fed through the till at the physical store, under another department. It was not until orders began to increase did the owners decide to obtain invoice generation technology for the web site. As learning took place, the sophistication of their retail operations increased. For example, software was created to link the physical shop's EPOS system and the online system. In addition, more products were put in the online store until eventually everything that was in the physical shop was also available online. However, although not a strategic objective from the outset, when internet sales consecutively overtook physical store sales, the SME made the decision to abandon its physical store during 2005.

Experimentation and learning took place through the use of multiple web sites, using different domain names. For instance, in 2005 the owners experimented with a site called 'cultclothes', wherein they trialed various visual merchandising techniques through a predominately masculine looking site. However it was soon abandoned as it was not cost effective, for example, the marketing budget had to be split in order to accommodate a multiple web presence. Perhaps more practically, as the owners pointed out, "*when you answered the phone, you did not know which retail brand to call yourself.*" From the experimentation and learning, the owners concluded that "*It confirmed to us all that we had worked for to build up our retail brand. It gave us confidence.*" This example of experimentation with various web sites is what Ashworth et al. (2006b) refer to as 'web weaving', and serves to illustrate the complexities involved for SMEs in running multiple online operations.

Ultimately the SMEs philosophy towards strategy planning was summed up by the following statement of the owners ¨*I believe that you cannot predict when change will occur or be required, you just need to always have your eye on the market and have a contingency plan to be able to 'exit' a market smoothly. The fact that we had built up an online business meant that we were able to do this, but it was in no way a long-term plan, but merely a reaction to changes in market conditions. Our strategy as entrepreneurs was to make commercial decisions based upon our best data at the time – not just learning and reacting, but studying the environment also.*¨

Discussion

The experience of electronic retail development with regard to the case study under examination indicates that the SME best fits into Idenburg's (1993) style of strategy development as the owners were weak on goal orientation yet strong in terms of process orientation. Evidence of weakness with regard to goal orientation is whilst they did have a strategic objective at the outset, that is, market expansion through little known to the UK cult fashion brands, there was no plan to ultimately close the high street shop. As the owners indicated, "*We never had a vision of moving totally from the high street and onto the internet.*" Yet the company closed their high street store when online sales continued to out-perform their high street sales. In addition to this, there was no objective in terms of an online marketing strategy at the outset. Neither were there objectives set with regard to merchandise strategy, customer relationship management or strategic integration of retail operations. However in terms of process orientation, the SME was strong. This was exhibited through the SMEs process of continuous adaption and improvement, which fits with a guided learning style of strategy development. Evidence for this is, unlike rational planning, they did not attempt to predict the future. Rather their future evolved through experimentation. Nor did they attempt to steer goals as is a typical logical incrementalist style of planning behaviour (Quinn, 1980). Rather, objectives were adapted as the e-tail initiative progressed. Whilst the owners decision making may be interpreted to be emergent, as decision making was largely a reaction to their learning, the owners behaviour cannot be wholly defined as emergent. The reason for this being that typical of emergent planning is reaction to events in a non-structured manner. Rather, the behaviour was structured, which was guided by environmental factors.

Whilst the above makes an argument for the SME's style of e-tail development as being defined as guided learning, the company did somewhat deviate from Idenburg's view of this style. For example, as indicated earlier, a typical feature of guided learning is one wherein mental models are evident but no action. Evidence of action is very prevalent within the case study, for instance, redesigning the web site and renaming the retail brand, amendments to the merchandise strategy and greater automation of the online processes. It can be argued here that SMEs cannot afford not to act, that is, unlike perhaps some large organisations, they do not have the resources in terms of time and personnel to engage solely in the learning process. Rather, in support of Idenburg's (1993) view, the case study company has taken on both strategy development and management development simultaneously in that, over time, they have learnt how to better exploit and manage the technologies of the internet.

In addition to the above, an omission from the planning views identified by Idenburg (1993) is the influence of external agencies in strategy development. In the case of the SME, a social network of other businesses played an influential role in the company's decision making, however none of the models accommodate this, rather, they interpret decision making as an internal activity of the organisation.

Conclusion

In this paper the authors have made a contribution to the limited empirical literature on e-tail development, by investigating the various strategy development models offered and examined the extent to which they are relevant to e-tail development. The study, utilising an autoethnographic method of data capture, adopted a single case study approach. Whilst the authors acknowledge that the subject of the study should be examined more widely, they argue that such self introspections offer a useful basis for knowledge in that rich and insightful data is obtained via the selected method.

The results of the study indicate that e-commerce business models currently evident within literature are either prescriptive in nature or alternatively, based upon empirical evidence, describe a company's e-commerce planning. Such descriptions are limited in that they are unique to the company under investigation. For example, data was captured at a unique point in time in the history of e-commerce development. Likewise this study also offers unique perspective of one SME wherein their planning style has been identified as guided learning. For the future, it is the intention of the researchers to feed the empirical findings of this case study into a wider research agenda, that encompasses a critical comparative case research of other UK fashion SMEs and thereby permit sector specific insights to be obtained, which in turn will inform both the academic community and practitioners alike of the nature of e-commerce development and strategy planning theory. It was also thought prudent that the authors' future research should also include companies who have developed web strategies post-2004, as the market is now a far less opportunistic prospect.

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Figure 1   Four Views on the Process of Strategy Development
(Idenburg, 1993)

```
|                   |Goal Orientation (What)                     |
|                   |                                            |
|                   |                                            |
|Process            |                                            |
|Orientation        |                                            |
|(How)              |                                            |
|                   |              |strong          |weak        |
|                   |strong        |Logical         |Guided      |
|                   |              |incrementalism  |Learning    |
|                   |              |Work of: Quinn; |Work of: Argyris;|
|                   |              |Handy           |Senge; de Geus |
|                   |weak          |Rational        |Emergent strategy|
|                   |              |Planning        |            |
|                   |              |Work of: Ansoff;|Work of:    |
|                   |              |Porter          |Mintzberg   |
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Figure 2   Views on the Process of E-commerce Strategy
Development

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|                   |Goal Orientation (What)                     |
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Process Orientation (How)		strong	weak
	strong	Logical incrementalism Daniel & Wilson Daniel et al. McBride	Guided Learning Constanzo (2004) Ashworth et al. (2006)
	weak	Rational Planning Shah & Dawson (2001) Van Hooft & Stegwee (2001) Siomkos & Vrechnpoulos (2002) Corbitt (2000)	Emergent strategy

Table 1: Profile of Case Study Company

Company Type	Pure play retailer
Year established as a high street independent	2000
Year established as a pure-play retailer	2005
Retail Experience	Previous offline experience, operated as a high street retailer.
Product type	Men and women's fashion
Firm size	4 employees
Market	Global