

2018

# Social Media Marketing Among Small Retail Clothing Businesses

Irene Michel Abrons  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Irene M Abrons

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Review Committee

Dr. Godwin Igein, Committee Chairperson, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Scott Burrus, Committee Member, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Dr. Annie Brown, University Reviewer, Doctor of Business Administration Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2018

Abstract

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by

Irene Abrons

MBA, Keller Graduate School of Management, 2009

BA, Southwestern College, 1994

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

January 2018

## Abstract

Social media marketing influences consumer trust in businesses, and trust accounts for about 37% of consumer purchasing decisions. The purpose of this multiple case study research was to identify the barriers to social media marketing that owners of small retail clothing businesses must overcome to be competitive. The conceptual framework was the technology acceptance model. Collected data consisted of company documents and semistructured interviews with 3 small retail clothing business owners in Chicago, Illinois, who had experience with social media marketing. Data analysis consisted of an open coding approach and member checking. The study revealed the small business owners who participated in this study had not experienced insurmountable barriers to their use of social media marketing. However, participants cited difficulties relating to the cost and time involved in social media marketing and the lack of suitable training. The 4 main themes that emerged relating to the perceived benefits of social media marketing were cost, convenience, ability to reach a large audience, and benefits relating to visual marketing. The study has implications for the success of the small business sector as well as the U.S. economy because data yielded insight into effective practice in social media marketing in the small retail clothing industry, as well as the types of barriers and difficulties that small business owners must overcome. This study has potential for social change because knowledge about the barriers to social media marketing could empower small businesses, especially in Chicago, to adopt strategies to overcome barriers, thereby remaining competitive and adding to the stability of small businesses as a significant source of jobs and economic growth.

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## Dedication

I am dedicating this to my grandparents and parents who sacrifice so much for me to complete this journey. I love you.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my husband Mitchell, and son Marchello, for their support and sacrifice for me to complete this goal. I would also like to thank Dr. Godwin for stepping in to help me finish this task, I know it wasn't easy. I would also like to thank Dr. Brodie Johnson and Dr. Annie Brown for supporting me in this journey. Your input and support to me is invaluable. Thank you all very much.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Small businesses account for over half of the United States' private sector workforce, and their failure can lead to unemployment and lost economic growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Effective marketing and marketing management can help prevent small business failure, thereby strengthening the economy (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Customers increasingly make purchasing decisions based on businesses' social media presence (Hajli, 2014; Hutter, Hautz, Dennhardt, & Fully, 2013). Without social media marketing strategies, small businesses may lose customers if they are unable to compete with the marketing approaches larger firms use (Clark & Calli, 2015; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Small business owners may lack concrete strategies to learn about and implement new technologies (Durkin, McGowan, & McKeown, 2013; Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

Researchers haven't fully understood the exact nature of the barriers small business managers face in implementing social media marketing strategies, making it difficult to overcome those barriers (Clark & Calli, 2015; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). To address the problem of small businesses' lack of social media marketing strategies, the purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to investigate how small businesses in Chicago, Illinois are using social media marketing and whether they lack strategies for implementation of social media marketing. To address the problem, it was necessary to (a) explore the nature and extent of small businesses' use of social media, and (b) explore small business owners' perceptions of the strategies they use for implementing social media as a marketing strategy.

Section 1 contains an introduction to the topic of the study, beginning with the background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, and research questions. For this study, the technology acceptance model (TAM) served as the conceptual framework, and Section 1 contains a description of the model. The section also contains definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, the significance of the study, and a review the professional and academic literature related to the research topic.

### **Background of the Problem**

Social media websites influence consumer trust in businesses, and trust accounts for about 37% of consumer purchasing decisions (Hajli, 2014). Small business owners have been slow to adopt social media marketing practices (Clark & Calli, 2015), owing in part to a lack of sufficient time, personnel, and money (Durkin et al., 2015). Socialmedia marketing is necessary for small business competitiveness; marketing managers at larger firms may pull ahead by using social media strategies to increase market share (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). As of 2014, over 90% of *Fortune* 500 companies used social media to attract customers (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014). Using social media to attract customers is important because 90% of firms that use social media marketing have reported benefits from doing so (Bughin & Chui, 2013). These benefits include increased marketing effectiveness, increased customer satisfaction, reduced marketing costs, reduced travel costs, and reduced customer support costs (Bughin & Chui, 2013). If small business owners do not use social media marketing, they may be unable to compete with other small and large businesses because they will not receive the benefits of social media

marketing. Failing to adopt social media marketing may thus pose a risk to small business owners.

Researchers outside the United States have conducted studies to understand small business owners' use of social media marketing (e.g., Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013; Durkin et al., 2013; Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). Research on barriers to adopting social media marketing is important because of evidence that small business owners resist adopting or incorporating social media marketing into their operations (Clark & Calli, 2015). However, researchers havenot clearly understood the reasons for this resistance. Therefore, there is a need for a clearer understanding of the barriers to adopting social media marketing, which may include a lack of concrete social media marketing strategies. When small business owners understand barriers to change, they are willing to address those barriers (Johnson, 2015). Thus, with a better understanding of what barriers lead small business owners to resist social media marketing, small businesses, especially in the Chicago area, may be empowered to adopt strategies to implement social media marketing. Adopting social media marketing may enable small businesses to remain competitive, adding to the stability of small businesses as a significant source of jobs and economic growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

### **Problem Statement**

By 2014, 94% of *Fortune* 500 companies were using social media to connect with consumers, and over 60% used three or more different social networking sites (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014). An increasing body of research has identified social media marketing as a critical success factor for small businesses (Hibbler-Britt & Sussan, 2015), with social

media usage accounting for 37% of sales among those who use social media (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014), yet small businesses lag behind larger businesses in the use of social media marketing (Clark & Calli, 2015; Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). The general business problem is that barriers to social media implementation, such as a lack of adequate time, lack of skilled personnel, and inadequate funding to implement social media marketing strategies, negatively affect some small business owners (Clark & Calli, 2015; Taneja & Toombs, 2014), resulting in a loss of competitiveness. The specific business problem is that, to be competitive, some owners of small retail clothing business need to overcome barriers that cause them to resist social media marketing.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses must overcome to be competitive. Focusing on the population group of three small retail clothing business owners in Chicago who had experience with social media marketing, I (a) explored the nature and extent of Chicago retail clothing small businesses' use of social media and (b) explored small business owners' perceptions of the role of social media for marketing. The setting of the study was Chicago, Illinois. Implications for positive social change included the potential to increase small business owners' awareness of ways to use social media marketing, which could enable them to increase revenues and provide employment. Providing employment contributes to social change because decreased unemployment rates may contribute to the overall economic wellbeing of Chicago.



### **Nature of the Study**

For this research, I applied a qualitative research method with a multiple case study design. A qualitative method was appropriate because my goal was to obtain rich, in-depth data. Yin (2015) wrote that qualitative research is best for studying a subject in depth. Additionally, Pettigrew (2013) indicated that, for business researchers, qualitative research is suitable to give broad context and meaning to research observations. By contrast, quantitative research is appropriate for testing theories related to variables that are numerically measurable in settings where generalizability is a concern (Davis, Golicic, Boerstler, Choi, & Oh, 2013). Because this study did not involve any numerical variables, I deemed quantitative research inappropriate. Mixed methods research combines quantitative and qualitative forms (Davis et al., 2013). Without a quantitative element, the research was not well suited to mixed methods research.

I chose the multiple case study approach because the purpose of the study was to explore a specific issue, namely, the nature of barriers to social media marketing use among small business owners. Rule and John (2015) noted that, when understanding an issue holistically is a researcher's aim, and when the topic of research is changing very quickly, multiple case studies are appropriate. Yin (2013) has written the seminal book on how to do case studies. According to Yin, case study research is preferred in situations that deal with contemporary phenomena and when researchers have little control over events.

The use of contemporary social media marketing is specific to the business context in which the marketing takes place. Therefore, the case study method was

appropriate to the study. In this research, the multiple units of study were the small businesses at which the research took place. Other qualitative research methods, including phenomenology, narrative, and ethnography, emphasize the research topics rather than individual cases (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). The purpose of this study was to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois must overcome to be competitive. Therefore, these other qualitative research methods were not appropriate. I followed Yin's (2013) method in designing the case study for this research. See Section 2 for a detailed account of the method.

### **Research Question**

To address the research problem, I used the following primary research question to guide the study:

What barriers to social media marketing must owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois, overcome to be competitive?

Answering this research question involved investigating how business owners in the retail clothing industry in downtown Chicago perceive the use of social media for marketing and promotion, what social media tools small business owners regularly use for marketing purposes, and why they have chosen to use those tools. I also investigated what barriers participants reported to using social media marketing, as well as participants' perceptions of the benefit of social media to small business.

### **Interview Questions**

The following interview questions guided interviews with participants. Questions 1 and 2 address background information, and Questions 3 through 9 address social media and social media marketing. I used standard interview questions with probes and attempted to determine the underlying reasons for the initial responses. I asked all participants each question. I did not use any questions other than those listed here. Table 1 links each interview questions with the dimensions of the TAM, which is the conceptual framework for the study.

Table 1

*Interview Items and Dimensions*

InterviewItem	Dimension
1. Howmanyyearshasyourcompanyhasbeeninbusiness?	Backgroundinform
2. Howdoyoudeterminethetypesofmarketingtoolsthataremosteffectiveforyou?(Prompt:educatedguess?doyoucalculateformalROI?)	ation
3. Turningtosocialmedia,whichincludeblogs,accountslikeTwitter,Facebook,orLinkedIn,pleasedescribewhattypesofsocialmediadoesyourcompanyuse?	Typesofsocialmedi ausage
4. Howandwhendidyoudecidetousesocialmediaforyourcompany?(Prompt:Whatwasyourdevelopmentprocess?Doyouhaveanyformalorinformalpoliciesaboutsocialmedia?)	Natureofsocialmedi ausage
5. Whataspectsofsocialmediaingeneraldoyoufindmostusefulforyourbusiness?	Usefulness(TAM)
6. Whatobstaclesordifficultiesdoyouencounterinusingsocialmediainyourbusinessingeneral?	Easeofuse(TAM)
7. Whydoyouordoyounotusesocialmediaformarketingpurposes?(Probe:Forwhatspecificmarketingactivitiesdoyouusesocialmedia?Onwhichsites?)	Perceptionofsocial mediamarketing
8. Ifyouwereinterestedinlearningmoreaboutanewsocialmediatoolortechnique,whatstepswouldyoutaketogainthatinformation?	Barrierstoimpleme ntationofsocialmedi amarketing
9. Whatadditionalinformationcanyoushareregardingyouruseofsocialmediaforthepurposeofthisstudy?	Additionalopen- endedquestion

### Conceptual Framework

The TAM (Davis, 1989) was the conceptual framework for this study. Across disciplines, the TAM has gained acceptance for predicting whether users will accept new

technologies (Ashraf, Thongpapanl, & Auh, 2014). The model incorporates two constructs that predict technology adoption: perceived usefulness (PU) and perceived ease of use (PEOU; Ashraf et al., 2014). PU is the extent to which one believes that using a technology would improve job performance, and PEOU is defined as the extent to which one believes that using a technology would require no effort (Venkatesh, 2014).

Davis developed the TAM in 1989 to predict user acceptance of computers (Venkatesh, 2014). Subsequent researchers have used the conceptual model to study technology acceptance (Ashraf et al., 2014). Because small business owners lag behind larger enterprises in the adoption and acceptance of social media marketing (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014), researchers must understand what factors contribute to or hinder the acceptance of social media among small business owners. The TAM, as a robust predictor of technology acceptance (Ashraf et al., 2014; Svendsen et al., 2013), was well suited to this study.

For this study, the interview guide contained four questions that specifically addressed PU (Questions 11, 14, and 15) and PEOU (Questions 12, 14, and 15; see Table 1). According to the TAM, both PU and PEOU should lead to implementation of social media marketing practices (Davis, 1989). With an understanding of factors that contribute to or detract from PU and PEOU among small business owners, I addressed these specific factors in the final research report, thus contributing to increased PU and PEOU among small business owners and others who read the report.

### **Operational Definitions**

I use the following specialized terms in this study:

*Perceived ease of use (PEOU)*:“The degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (Davis, 1989, p. 320).

*Perceived usefulness (PU)*:“The degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance” (Davis, 1989, p. 320).

*Small business*:Any business that is owner operated independently, that a founder has organized as a for-profit business, and that is not dominant in its field (U.S. Small Business Administration [SBA], n.d.).

*Social media*:A form of communication whose sole purpose is to provide open communication between individuals, companies, consumers and everyone in between” (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013, p. 11). Social media tools include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, blogs, and others (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

*Social media marketing*:“The use of a technology platform to develop a community of stakeholders to create collectively, know, like, and trust relevant matters of the business entity” (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014, p. 188).

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

Assumptions are facts about the study or its context that a researcher assumes to be true but does not or cannot confirm (Myers, 2013). Limitations are weaknesses in the study that are beyond the researcher’s control and may influence validity or interpretation of the data (Myers, 2013). Delimitations are definitions of the boundaries and scope of a study, including geographical boundaries, participant exclusion criteria, and others (Myers, 2013).

**Assumptions**

Assumptions are facts about the study or its context that a researcher assumes to be true but does not or cannot confirm (Myers, 2013). Because I used a multiple case study method for this research, I assumed that the selected cases, namely, small businesses located in Chicago, Illinois, were appropriate to address the purpose of the study. Section 2 contains a detailed description of the sampling procedure by which I attempted to identify small businessowners who made use of at least one social media marketing tool. This robust sampling procedure mitigated the risk associated with this assumption. The triangulation process, by which I used documentary evidence of small business owners' use of social media in addition to in-depth interviews, also mitigated the risks from potential participant dishonesty.

I gathered data for this study in part through in-depth interviews with business owners. In using this data collection method, I assumed that participants would answer interview questions candidly and honestly. To mitigate the risk associated with this assumption, I used nonthreatening, exploratory interview questions and informed all participants of their right to withdraw from the research at any time. In addition, I informed participants that they should feel free to decline to answer any question that madethem uncomfortable.

**Limitations**

Limitations are weaknesses in the study that are beyond the researcher's control and may influence validity or interpretation of the data (Myers, 2013). This study had two primary limitations. First, the results of the study are not generalizable to small business

settings other than the participants' enterprises, owing to the context-specific nature of case study research (Yin, 2013). Nevertheless, the results yielded insights into small business owners' use of social media marketing and their perceived barriers to implementation.

Second, the findings of this research are subject to a possibility of bias because I subjectively analyzed collected data for cross-case comparisons and conclusions. To address this limitation, I asked each participant to conduct member checking of the researcher-generated interview summaries. The member checking process did not necessitate changes to the interview summaries.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries and scope of a study, including geographical boundaries, participant exclusion criteria, and others (Myers, 2013). The scope of this multiple case study research project was the specific small business contexts in which the study participants operated. This study did not involve examination of social media marketing at small retail clothing businesses other than those that I selected for inclusion in the study. Furthermore, the metropolitan area of Chicago, Illinois acted as delimitation for this study, as the participants ran businesses in this area. Under the documentary data collection process, my examination of participants' existing social media presence, the following delimited the study: Internet-based applications, third-party profiles (e.g., LinkedIn, Facebook), and other communications accessible online as of the time of data collection. I did not include any former or future social media activities in the study. In



addition, I did not investigate participants' personal or nonbusiness related use of social media.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study makes a significant contribution to the practice of business, particularly in Chicago, Illinois, and particularly for small business owners. This study also has important implications for social change, which I discuss below.

### **Contribution to Business Practice**

Small businesses employ 52% of Americans, but small businesses also fail at a relatively high rate, leading to unemployment and lost economic growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Effective marketing, specifically social media marketing, is a business skill small business owners need to develop and use to help their businesses succeed (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Researchers have found that variations in marketing strategy may account for up to half of the variation in business performance across sectors (Blackburn, Hart, & Wainwright, 2013). An increasing body of research has identified social media marketing as a critical success factor for small businesses (Hibbler-Britt & Sussan, 2015). Scholars and practitioners may use the results of the study to develop recommendations and strategies small businesses can use to develop social media marketing programs. Such programs could help these businesses to succeed and thereby enable them to maintain or enhance their employee base and revenues and avoid failure.

### **Implications for Social Change**

In the time of economic recovery following the 2008 financial collapse, small businesses played an essential role in the private sector. As large corporations add fewer

new jobs to the economy, the United States underwent a shift toward small business employment (Audretsch, Lehman, & Menter, 2016). If the United States is to maintain its position as the world's largest economy, small businesses must have access to the resources they need to remain competitive on local and global scales (Audretsch et al., 2016). In this study, by contributing an understanding of barriers that small businessowners face in integrating the latest technologies into their business practices, I could help ensure that American small businesses stay on the cutting edge of technology and marketing.

In addition, this study could have an impact on the adoption of social media in the business community generally, which may improve social conditions by facilitating open communication between consumers and businesses. Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) defined social media marketing as a process by which businesses develop communities and which contributes to the knowledge and trust shared among stakeholders in that community. In recent years, many have questioned the trustworthiness of large corporations, despite increased attention to corporate social responsibility initiatives (Cheng, Ioannou, & Serafeim, 2014). Thus, small businesses are in a unique position to improve communications with stakeholders and contribute to a more open, trusting business community and society. For example, small businesses can hold meetings with local community leaders to discuss the community's needs, and small business owners are available to hear and address customers' concerns directly. I hope that this study represents a step forward in achieving competitiveness through social media marketing for the Chicago small retail clothing firms that participated in this study.

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

In this review, I present and assess existing theoretical and research literature related to the topic of social media marketing in small businesses. I searched EBSCOHost and ProQuest databases using the following collections: Business Source Premier, Academic Search Premier, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Master FILE Premier, and Regional Business News. The following keywords were among those used in searches, individually and in combination: *small business, marketing, e-marketing, CRM, e-CRM, online marketing tools, Internet marketing, e-business, long-term, short-term, strategy, SMEs, customer perception, trust, privacy, perceptions of social media, Facebook, Twitter*. The literature review includes 80 articles, of which 64 (80%) have publication dates within the past 5 years.

First, I present a review of literature related to the TAM, which is the conceptual framework for this study. I have organized the remaining results of the literature review into two primary sections on small business marketing and social media marketing. Within the former, subsections contain reviews of literature related to the definition of small business, small business marketing innovations, and small business owners' marketing approaches. Within the section on social media marketing, subsections contain reviews of literature related to social media marketing and small business, including the benefits and drawbacks of social media marketing, and social media marketing tools, including their prevalence. Finally, I review literature on perceptions of social media marketing in small business. A summary concludes the review.

## TAM

The TAM was the conceptual framework for this study. Davis developed the TAM in 1989 to predict user acceptance of computers (Venkatesh, 2014). Subsequent researchers have used the conceptual model to study acceptance of technologies of all types (Ashraf et al., 2014). Across disciplines, the TAM has gained acceptance for predicting whether users will accept new technologies (Ashraf et al., 2014). The model incorporates two constructs that predict technology adoption: PU and PEOU (Ashraf et al., 2014). PU is the extent to which one believes that using a technology would improve job performance, and PEOU is defined as the extent to which one believes that using a technology would require no effort (Venkatesh, 2014).

Although research has confirmed Davis's (1989) theoretical model, the TAM is not without detractors. For example, some researchers have suggested that measuring PU and technology adoption leads to common method bias, indicating that PU is not significantly distinct as a construct from technology adoption (see Venkatesh, 2014). Such common method bias is a problem in predictive, quantitative models, because common method bias indicates that statistical correlations between PU and technology adoption may reflect merely the similarity in the two concepts, rather than any revelation about user behavior (Venkatesh, 2014). However, common method bias is not a problem for this study, as this study was qualitative in nature and did not involve testing quantitative models. As such, common method bias was not a concern. Rather, I used the TAM in this study to guide the development of interview questions to determine whether small business owners lack concrete strategies to implement social media

marketing. PU and PEOU may constitute barriers to social media marketing adoption and may partly explain a lack of concrete strategies among small and medium enterprise (SME) owners (Clark & Calli, 2015; Durkin et al., 2013).

Because small business owners lag behind larger enterprises in the adoption and acceptance of social media marketing (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014), researchers must understand what factors contribute to or hinder the acceptance of social media among small business owners. The TAM, as a robust predictor of technology acceptance (Ashraf et al., 2014; Svendsen et al., 2013), was well suited to this study.

Several researchers have investigated small business owners' use of Internet-based technologies using the TAM. For example, Mohabbattalab, von der Heidt, and Mohabbattalab (2014) examined the factors that lead SMEs to move traditional services to cloud computing (i.e., Internet-based) services. Their sample consisted of 410 Malaysian SMEs. They found that scalability, security, and flexibility were the most important factors influencing SMEs' decision to adopt cloud computing (Mohabbattalab et al., 2014). Interestingly, cost effectiveness was not one of the most important factors, contrasting with the large body of research indicating that the low financial barrier to social media marketing is important to small businesses (e.g., Nobre & Silva, 2014). However, the finding was in alignment with the results of Eid and El-Gohary (2013), who asserted that businesses should allocate significant budget to e-marketing activities. Mohabbattalab et al.'s finding fits with the TAM because scalability and flexibility are dimensions of PEOU, which is one of the dimensions of the TAM.

By contrast, Caniels, Lenaerts, and Gelderman (2015), in their quantitative study, found no relationship between PEOU and intention to use the internet. Instead, intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors were significant, echoing Schaupp and Bélanger (2014), who found that pressure from customers was important in predicting social media use among small businesses. Finally, Venkatesh and Goyal (2010) expanded the TAM with new variables uncovered through exploratory research at a small law firm. Venkatesh and Goyal found that the TAM was suitable for understanding the adoption of new technologies in the research setting. However, this finding may not be generalizable to small businesses in the retail clothing industry. Despite the limited research available, the TAM was an appropriate theoretical framework for this research. Additionally, one of the contributions of this study was to examine the suitability of the TAM to the research setting, adding to the available literature on the TAM and social media use among small businesses.

### **Small Business Marketing**

In this section, I considered the existing literature on small business marketing broadly. I organized the topic as follows: first, I defined small business and small business marketing and indicated their importance; second, I reviewed literature related to recent innovations and adaptations in small business marketing; third, I presented literature regarding attempts to measure the success of marketing in small business; finally, I summarized what scholars currently know about small business owners' approach to marketing, including the extent of their use of various marketing strategies.

**Small business marketing defined.** The SBA (n.d.) defined a *small business concern* as any business that is owner operated independently, that a founder has organized as a for-profit business, and that is not dominant in its field. The SBA sets employee and revenue limits for each industry. For example, the SBA considers businesses in the manufacturing industry to be small businesses with up to 1,500 employees, depending on the product manufactured, whereas the maximum size for a wholesaling small business is 500 employees (SBA, n.d.). No consensus definition exists of small business, and researchers have varied widely in the definitions they use (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). Although this lack of consensus definition could lead to limitations in the applicability of small business research, Eid and El-Gohary (2013) claimed that scholars seem to generally agree that independence and lack of market dominance are important traits.

Small businesses are the leading drivers of worldwide economic development (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). In the United States, small businesses provide half of all private-sector jobs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The percentage of private-sector jobs provided by small businesses demonstrates that the success and competitiveness of small businesses are important for the health and growth of the U.S. economy. Compared to larger enterprises, small businesses have some unique characteristics. For example, the labor that takes place in small businesses tends to be less vertically organized and to have fewer levels (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013). Small business owners tend to be independent, and the businesses are often financially dependent on their owners, who keep close control over business operations (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013).

Marketing is especially important for small businesses because marketing helps them to establish competitiveness. In several studies, researchers have addressed the importance of marketing to the competitiveness of small businesses. In a study of the factors that contributed to or detracted from competitiveness among 109 SMEs in Mexico, Aguilera-Enríquez, González-Adame, and Rodríguez-Camacho (2011) determined that some aspect of marketing accounted for more than half of the variance in performance among companies in multiple sectors.

This dramatic result underscores the extent to which marketing is essential to small businesses' survival. By way of comparison, Wiesel et al. (2011) reached a similar result. The researchers investigated the impact of shifting marketing strategies on profits in a field experiment at one small business. Wiesel et al. found that, by redirecting marketing efforts to align with evidence on the impact of those efforts, the business was able to increase net profits 14 times more than the business could have using its prior marketing strategy. Both the Wiesel et al. finding and the Aguilera-Enríquez et al. finding demonstrated the significant impact that well-designed marketing approaches can have on small business performance.

**Innovations in small business marketing.** Marketing innovation has been another popular small business research direction. In general, for small businesses, marketing innovation is often a more affordable and accessible means for these firms to achieve growth than is product innovation or organizational innovation (Çetinkaya & Kalkan, 2014). Innovation can mediate the relationship between performance and



resources, increasing performance for businesses whose financial and tangible resources are limited (De Zubieta, Lindsay, & O'Connor, 2014).

The continued competitiveness of small businesses largely depends on marketing success. By contrast, however, Durkin et al. (2013) stressed that traditional marketing techniques, including advertisements in traditional media like television and magazines, can be prohibitively expensive for small businesses. The small business environment has long been a locus of marketing innovation as small business owners seek creative, cost-effective ways to market their products and services (Durkin et al., 2013; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). These studies emphasize the importance of innovation in small business marketing.

Relatedly, researchers have found that, to adjust to constantly shifting markets, small businesses adapt marketing techniques by applying existing strategies in novel ways to address their unique situations, including their specific target audiences, their specific markets, and their specific business structures (Clark & Calli, 2015). An important early work by Carson (1985) indicated that an appropriate understanding of small business marketing accounts for whether small business marketing strategies are appropriate to current market conditions. Firms that do not adapt their *marketing mixes*—the different sorts of marketing strategies a single business employs—to external factors have mismatched marketing and low innovation (Carson, 1985). By contrast, small businesses that use innovative marketing tend to adapt their marketing strategies to their environments (Carson, 1985).

**Measuring small business marketing.** The body of research indicating the difficulty of measuring small business marketing success contrasts with the studies I reviewed above, which suggested that marketing and business success are related. Despite its importance, marketing success has been notoriously difficult to measure, particularly among small businesses (Miles, 2014). One reason for this difficulty is that marketing has both immediately identifiable, short-term effects and longer-term, intangible effects such as brand equity (Miles, 2014). In addition, there is no standard metric for marketing performance.

In a theoretical article on small business marketing, Brooks and Simkin (2011) noted that that researchers and theorists have developed over 250 different measures of marketing success and that few of those measures have a solid scientific basis. The authors developed a framework for understanding the many available measures, separating them into four categories: financial measures (e.g., return on investment [ROI]), quantitative measures (e.g., market share), qualitative measures (e.g., brand awareness), and hybrid measures (e.g., brand equity; Brooks & Simkin, 2011). Throughout the literature on both traditional and social media marketing, each of these types of measures is common (Brooks & Simkin, 2011). Using marketing success metrics such as this one could help small business owners assess their marketing practices, thereby addressing the findings of Blackburn et al. (2013) and others related to the importance of strategic marketing.

It is difficult to assess small business marketing success in general because there has been limited research related to the overall marketing strategies regularly used by

small businesses. Some researchers have examined the impact of particular marketing strategies. For example, O'Dwyer, Gilmore, and Carson (2011) investigated the impact of strategic alliances as an innovative marketing strategy for SMEs.

O'Dwyer et al. (2011) studied eight SMEs in a case study and uncovered various types of strategic alliances with other firms. The researchers concluded that strategic alliances have the primary outcomes of achieving organizational goals and overcoming organizational challenges. They also concluded that strategic alliances increased competitive advantage for the SMEs investigated and could prove beneficial as a small business marketing strategy (O'Dwyer et al., 2011). Networking has also received attention as a specific marketing technique. O'Donnell (2014) conducted an in-depth qualitative study of networking as a small business marketing strategy and analyzed the strategy's benefits. These two studies supported the conclusion that relationship-based marketing is common among small businesses.

By contrast, Durkin et al. (2013) found that small business owners often do not use specific marketing techniques and strategies, instead adopting social media out of a sense of anxiety. The researchers conducted a study related to the nature of small business marketing activities on a general level. By conducting action research among a sample of eight SMEs in Ireland over a period of 2 years, the researchers sought to determine the type of marketing used by SMEs, the practitioners' perceptions of marketing effectiveness, and its impact on the businesses' survival (Durkin et al., 2013). The results indicated that a majority of SMEs might not have well-defined, strategic approaches to marketing. A minority of participants had a clear agenda for social media

marketing, routinely compiled adequate marketing data, understood their difference from competitors, or thought about the unique characteristics of their market segments (Durkin et al., 2013). In addition, social media adoption varied according to staff competency with social media (Durkin et al., 2014).

Focusing on social media marketing, scholars typically suggest using ROI as a measure of social media marketing success, but it is not clear how small businesses should accomplish this task. Romero (2011) considered social media marketing in nonprofit institutions, where ROI may not be a relevant measure of success. The result of Romero's analysis was a set of concrete strategies for measuring social media marketing success, which could be relevant to for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike.

Romero (2011) made four suggestions. First, Romero suggested that organizations compare the number of current social media users with the number of users at some past time, considering an increase in the number of users as a success. Second, the researcher suggested that businesses compare consumers' behaviors before and after following the organization on social media to determine whether social media leads to desired outcomes such as repeat business. Third, according to Romero, businesses should compare the success of past and present promotions, developments, and events to determine whether communicating such events on social media contributes to their success. Fourth and finally, Romero suggested that businesses measure the influence of social media marketing efforts on consumers' brand perceptions (Romero, 2011). Kourti (2015) agreed that focusing on fewer social media tools was more efficient for start-up businesses, suggesting that newly formed businesses should focus their efforts on a single

tool. The Romero report is notable because the report focused, unlike many related reports, on concrete methods for identifying the success of social media marketing.

**Small business owners' approach to marketing.** The Durkin et al. (2013) study is especially important because the study reveals a lack of knowledge among small business owners regarding how to use marketing effectively. Small businesses that lack the resources to engage in traditional marketing rely on connections, word of mouth, and occasional forays into more organized marketing. However, no cohesive or integrated marketing plan is in place. Given the researchers' finding that small business owners uniformly perceived marketing to be extremely important for developing customer relationships and making sales (Durkin et al., 2013), this lack of organization in small business marketing indicates a serious business problem.

Like Durkin et al. (2013), Cronin-Gilmore (2012) sought to understand small businesses' overall approach to marketing. The latter study, Cronin-Gilmore, is particularly significant because the study is one of the few on the topic that took place in the United States. Among a purposive sample of 20 small business owners, Cronin-Gilmore conducted in-depth interviews to explore marketing strategy efforts. Cronin-Gilmore discovered that most participants engaged in marketing activities like networking and forming strategic alliances. However, Cronin-Gilmore did not find social media marketing to be a common strategy; participants used the Internet primarily for passive market segment research (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). Some research indicates that up to 75% of small businesses have a social media presence (Taneja & Toombs, 2014), but, as Cronin-Gilmore's research shows, business owners do not actively engage with

their audiences. More recent research work supports this trend (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Similar to O'Donnell's (2014) finding, networking activities were an important source of the businesses' competitiveness, and participants arrived at most decisions by examining strategies that others had found successful.

Using successful networking examples is crucial because small businesses need concrete information on how to engage in new marketing strategies, such as social media marketing, to implement them fully. Cronin-Gilmore (2012) also reported that the small business owners felt cash flow and technology were their biggest obstacles. However, excellent customer service and customer relationships were among the business owners' biggest strengths, suggesting that businesses could integrate online communications into their strategies if the business owners could overcome the obstacles. Finally, the researcher recommended that marketing-related training and knowledge resources should be available to small business owners and that researcher and practitioners should evaluate existing knowledge resources their effectiveness (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012).

Taken all together, the studies I reviewed in this subsection can be synthesized to conclude that social media marketing is not common among small businesses and that small businesses often prefer relationship-based marketing strategies like networking due to a lack of time, financial resources, and technology barriers. Social media and other new technologies represent an opportunity for small businesses to improve their marketing performance at a lower cost than would have been possible with traditional marketing. I discuss the role of social media marketing in small businesses in depth later in this chapter.

## **Social Media Marketing**

Social media marketing has emerged as a marketing modality in the past two decades. Collectively, researchers call marketing practices based on new technologies *e-marketing* (Eid & El Gohary, 2013). As with small businesses, definitions of e-marketing and social media vary widely throughout existing literature. In general, however, e-marketing includes not only the use of technologies like the Internet in marketing practices, but also the use of electronic applications and data for planning, managing, and analyzing marketing campaigns (Eid & El Gohary, 2013). In addition to social media marketing, e-marketing can include e-mail marketing, Internet marketing through websites, mobile marketing, and others. Of these e-marketing modalities, small business researchers study social media marketing the most widely.

Researchers defined social media marketing as technology for developing stakeholder communities to collectively create and interact with matters relevant to the business (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). This definition emphasizes the development of the community, which is unique to social media compared with other e-marketing techniques. Additionally, the definition is broad enough to include third-party platforms like Facebook along with proprietary communities, message boards, mobile device applications, and blogging. However, care should be taken not to consider social media marketing as simply an online version of traditional word-of-mouth marketing (Brown, Broderick, & Lee, 2007). Rather, social media marketing has emerged as a distinct business practice, with its set of benefits, drawbacks, challenges, and opportunities.

Across business sizes and sectors, scholars broadly agree that social media is an important marketing tool and that social media is effective in improving business results. One market research firm found that 90% of businesses reported experiencing, at least, one benefit from social media marketing activities (Bughin & Chui, 2013). In their review of existing literature, Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) found that researchers reported the following benefits most frequently: increased sales, increased market size, improved employee relations, improved customer satisfaction, better technical support, lower marketing expenses, and better search engine rankings.

By comparison, Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) emphasized the importance of monitoring outcomes in measuring marketing success, noting that social media tools allow businesses to interpret the number of followers they have, the number of hits their websites get, and the number of comments they receive on their online messages. Consumers engage in social media conversations about topics that interest them, and companies that associate their brands with these conversations create powerful brand engagement that can translate to customer loyalty, and increased purchasing (Pham & Gammoh, 2015). Together, these findings suggest that social media marketing is useful as both a communication strategy and a market analysis strategy.

Interestingly, social media marketing appears to have distinct features that differentiate social media marketing from traditional word-of-mouth marketing. Brown et al. (2007) conducted an early, important study on this issue. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with consumers who used a particular online community to engage with one small business, and they analyzed the online interactions themselves. Brown et



al. (2007) concluded that consumers act as though online social media networks, particularly those on company websites, were independent actors. Therefore, consumers perceive their relationship to the business as constituted by, rather than mediated by, online social media engagements. This fact has important implications for small businesses, and highlights the importance of social media engagement. In particular, small businesses with strengths in traditional business areas such as face-to-face service could lose business if consumers engage with poorly developed websites, because consumers are likely to view those no optimal websites as representative of the quality of the business. Social media and online presence have become, therefore, an essential consideration for every small business.

The content of businesses' social media messages could lead to increased trust among stakeholders and increased purchasing decisions, according to Haigh, Brubaker, and Whiteside (2013). The Haigh et al. study consisted of content analysis of 114 business' Facebook pages, along with questionnaires distributed to consumers both before and after engagement with the Facebook pages of three exemplar businesses (Kellogg's, Walmart, and Best Buy).

The results showed that Facebook pages strongly bolstered purchase intent among consumers who saw a Facebook page with content related to corporate social responsibility (Kellogg's), compared with both a Facebook page related to corporate ability (Best Buy) and one with a hybrid strategy incorporating both corporate responsibility and ability (Walmart). However, Haigh et al. (2013) discovered that for-profit corporations tend to focus on corporate ability in their Facebook posts, indicating

an opportunity to improve performance by shifting the content of messages toward corporate social responsibility. Readers should note that the researchers obtained these results with a small sample of large corporations, so they may not be transferrable to small business environments. However, the results of the Haigh et al. (2013) study strongly suggest that a variety of social media strategies and focuses are available to businesses, and marketing decision makers should carefully consider the content focus when developing social media marketing activities.

In their review, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) focused on both form and content in their recommendations for businesses interested in using social media. They contended that businesses should not try to engage in all social media platforms but should instead choose those that fit the best with their intended audience and purpose. Similarly, they recommended focusing on concrete applications for social media, integrating the social media plan into the overall marketing strategy. With respect to content, their main recommendations, based on lessons from social media use in large firms, were to actively, regularly communicate in an honest, interesting, humble, and candid manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The scholars asserted that, although these recommendations come from the example of large companies, they also represented relevant best practices for SMEs. They concluded that social media present significant opportunities for business improvement.

By contrast, social media marketing has certain drawbacks. For example, Scott and Orlikowski (2012) investigated the use of social media in the travel sector and its impact on accountability. Scott and Orlikowski found that online tools like TripAdvisor

tended to shift accountability toward consumers by creating emergent notions of group wisdom and collective knowledge. On this model, consumers provide a service to the businesses they patronize when they leave favorable reviews, and vice versa. However, TripAdvisor and similar sites may influence the way the public perceives businesses through designing and manipulating algorithms to enhance visibility organizations at the expense of others, suggesting that social media could threaten the integrity of organizations in managing their image through building customer relationships (Scott & Orlikowski, 2012). Organizations that develop bad reputations on social media face a lasting negative impact to their reputations (Aula, 2010).

According to Aula (2010), although reputation risk itself is not new, the use of social media intensifies reputation risk. The author distinguished between conventional and ambient publicity, citing several instances when consumers or other third parties contributed negative publicity, damaging business' reputations by sharing negative information about those businesses on social media. Aula suggested that businesses need to manage proactively their reputations, including engaging with negative ambient publicity to mitigate reputation damage. The fear of reputation risk could be one barrier preventing businesses from engaging in social media marketing. I discuss drawbacks specific to the small business implementation of social media marketing later in this review. Together, the existing research indicates that social media marketing has both benefits (e.g., Haigh et al., 2013) and drawbacks (Scott & Orlikowski, 2012; Aula, 2010). The benefits may outweigh the drawbacks if social media marketing proves to be effective.

As with other forms of marketing, the effectiveness of social media marketing has proven difficult to measure. It is easy to determine the costs of social media marketing, and the modest expense associated with social media has been a driving factor in its growing popularity (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). However, the associated profits are more elusive. According to Romero (2011), the difficulty of concretely linking profit to social media marketing has led to the emergence of other measures of success, including the number of users of a website, brand perception, and social media user behavior. As described in the section entitled Small Business Marketing, above, Romero recommended four concrete indicators of social media marketing success, including comparing consumers' behavior before and after engaging with a business on social media and measuring brand perception before and after engaging in social media marketing. It remains unclear, however, whether and to what extent these indicators translate into business value.

The Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) and Romero (2011) studies are comparable to other research that emphasizes the variable success of different strategies. Although, in general, consumers do not perceive Internet-based direct marketing as aggressive (Watson, McCarthy, & Rowley, 2013), evidence suggests that the type and frequency of such marketing are important. For example, some businesses have attempted to target social media messages to consumers who would be the most likely to share those messages with their online networks in an effective manner (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). Together, these studies support the inference that small businesses should approach social media marketing circumspectly to avoid difficulties.

Kumar and Sundaram (2012) argued that the optimal social marketing technique rewards consumers for sharing a business' messages via social media platforms. The authors considered social media sharing to be the most positive strategy because it gives consumers the greatest degree of control over the marketing relationship, and it provides the flexibility and traceability that leads to useful market information for businesses (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). They contrasted the approach with a broadcast approach, whereby businesses would merely broadcast messages on social media platforms to their contacts, without encouraging or tracking how consumers share those messages. Although the approach suggested by Kumar and Sundaram would require more time and resource investment than the broadcast approach, the researchers suggested the investment would result in a higher return. Little other peer-reviewed literature addresses optimal social media marketing techniques. Some scholars have made recommendations to small businesses in particular; I review these in the following section, entitled Perceptions of Social Media Marketing.

The majority of existing research on social media marketing has focused on large organizations (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). One reason for this could be that social media marketing is much more common among large businesses than among small ones. Ratliff and Kunz (2014) reported that 94% of *Fortune* 500 companies used social media as of 2014, compared with only about 60% of small businesses (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). A few researchers have examined the use of social media marketing among small businesses, yielding an early understanding of the topic. I reviewed this body of research in the following subsection.

**Social media marketing and small business.** In an online setting, small businesses often enter into direct competition with larger enterprises due to the equal ease with which consumers can access companies' websites and other online presences. As a result, a growing body of literature suggests that branding and brand management are increasing in importance for small businesses (Mitchell, Hutchinson, & Quinn, 2013). In addition to its general benefits as a marketing strategy, discussed above, social media marketing can also be a powerful brand management tool for small businesses (Nobre & Silva, 2014). Additionally, social media marketing allows small businesses to communicate with customers very efficiently. Communication through social media marketing is important because research has shown that customer communication is crucial to the operation of small businesses. Open communications that create mutual value can be enhanced using social media marketing (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

In one of the only articles to focus specifically on the retail sector, Mitchell et al. (2013) developed a conceptual framework for understanding the importance of brand management to small business. They identified marketing as an important component of this framework, suggesting that owners and managers creatively manage the public's awareness and perception of retail brands through marketing decisions and strategies. Interestingly, they emphasized the often ad hoc nature of small business marketing, noting that small business marketing strategies can change dynamically with the owners' or managers' personal interactions with customers (Mitchell et al., 2013). Thus, as small business owners interact with consumers using social media, they can dynamically adjust their marketing efforts to respond to customers' wants and needs. This level of flexibility

may be unavailable to larger firms, whose marketing decision makers often do not have direct contact with customers. By contrast, others have recommended that businesses develop concrete social media marketing strategies before beginning marketing activities (e.g., Haigh et al., 2013). However, small businesses may be able to employ broad strategies while simultaneously making tactical adjustments in a dynamic way.

Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) conducted one of the most important studies on social media marketing among small businesses. Their sample consisted of businesses listed in the *Inc. 5000* index, which is an annually published list of the 500 fastest-growing corporations in the United States. Although company size is not a requirement for inclusion in the *Inc. 5000*, company size is widely considered an indicator of the small business environment (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). On the 2013 list, approximately 75% of the 500 fastest-growing businesses had 100 employees or fewer (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). Barnes and Jacobsen conducted telephone interviews with marketing executives at *Inc. 5000* businesses after the publication of 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2010 lists, allowing for longitudinal analysis. The response rate among all 500 businesses averaged 32% over the duration of the study.

The Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) study yielded important information on how successful small businesses use social media marketing and on changes over the period between 2006 and 2010. In 2010, 86% of respondents perceived social media to be very important or somewhat important to their business or marketing strategies. This figure rose steadily beginning in 2006 with the first survey (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013), indicating an increasing belief among successful small businesses that social media is

important. Similarly, 83% of respondents in 2010 indicated that they used, at least, one of the social media tools the researchers investigated (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Foursquare, blogging, message boards, video, and podcasting).

Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) also found that social media use varies by industry. The researchers found that government services, energy, and financial industries implemented social media marketing at disproportionately low levels. Barnes' and Jacobsen's results indicate that the cultures or trends in particular business areas could present a barrier to the use of social media marketing and consumer communication in those areas (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). The findings of Cronin-Gilmore (2012) and O'Donnell (2014) presented a similar conclusion; all emphasized the common use of networking and word of mouth, rather than new technologies, among some small businesses. Finally, 57% of respondents in the Barnes and Jacobsen study said that they used social media and search engines to recruit and evaluate potential employees, suggesting that social media has utility beyond customer relations and that new and innovative uses of social media could contribute to small business success (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Marketing strategies of using social media to establish connections with consumers and communicate with target audiences overlap with the field of customer relationship management (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014). Research has determined that strong customer relationships are often the most important competitive edge that small businesses have over larger enterprises (Harrigan et al., 2011). In a study of 1,445 SMEs in Ireland, Harrigan et al. (2011) investigated the impact of Internet-based



tools on customer relationship management and online marketing. The quantitative study presented the results of an analysis of data from online survey questionnaires. Results indicated that communicating with customers electronically yielded positive results for the participant businesses.

Notably, electronic communications enhanced customer service and generated more sales, and respondents saw an overall increase in profitability related to the use of electronic communications. Interestingly, the researchers also reported that using the Internet for communication allowed SMEs to personalize communications to a great extent. It is important to note that respondents also emphasized the importance of face-to-face communications in SME marketing. Harrigan et al. (2011) concluded that businesses should use online tools as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional marketing and networking practices. The Harrigan et al. finding accords well with the recommendation of Kumar and Sundaram (2012) that small business should give consumers control over social media interactions, including whether or not consumers interact with businesses online or face-to-face.

Similarly, Einwiller, and Boenigk (2012) recently demonstrated the importance for small businesses of having a targeted communication strategy. The researchers studied the link between such communication strategies, or *integrated marketing communications* (ICMs), and communication effectiveness among a sample of 642 medium-sized companies based in Switzerland. The researchers measured communication effectiveness as perceived increase in ROI, brand awareness, customer satisfaction, and employee satisfaction. The results revealed a significant correlation

between ICMs and all measures of communication effectiveness (Einwiller & Boenigk, 2012). Einwiller's and Boenigk's finding is significant to the topic of social media marketing among small business because social media tools, including e-mail and Facebook, allow businesses to approach customer communications more strategically than might be feasible using traditional methods. These findings contrast sharply with those of Durkin et al. (2013) and Cronin-Gilmore (2012), whose studies revealed a lack of targeted marketing and communication strategies among small businesses. Together, these studies further underscore the importance of this study, whose purpose was to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois must overcome to be competitive.

Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) conducted one of the most important studies to date related to social media and small business conceptually. The researchers distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews to validate their model of social media in small business, which addressed both the antecedents of social media use and the value of social media in small business environments. They found that employees' competence with technologies and pressure from consumers were two important predictors of social media use (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Therefore, small businesses whose employees understand how to use social media and whose customers request social media should be more likely to engage in social media marketing. However, Schaupp and Bélanger found that marketing was only one dimension of the perceived importance of social media among small business participants. Although social media use had a significant impact on marketing, participants even more strongly perceived internal operations and sales as

benefits of social media (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Taken in conjunction with the evidence related to the value of social media marketing specifically, this suggests that small business owners and decision makers may underestimate the importance of social media as a marketing tool.

Though an abundance of evidence shows that marketing is important in general (e.g., Pham & Gammoh, 2015), only a few studies have demonstrated the direct influence of social media marketing. Eid and El-Gohary (2013) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies to date to investigate the effect of online marketing on small business performance. The researchers developed a model of e-marketing, which included social media tools and e-mail, and tested the model's effectiveness among a representative sample of 391 small businesses in the United Kingdom. The research questionnaire measured 16 variables, including the use of e-marketing tools, marketing effectiveness, pre-sales factors influenced by e-marketing, and after-sales factors influenced by e-marketing.

Results from the Eid and El-Gohary (2013) study contributed several insights to the understanding of social media marketing in small business. First, participants used Internet marketing, including social media marketing, more frequently than e-mail marketing. Additionally, the budget and tools available to small businesses to engage in e-marketing significantly influence businesses' tendency to engage in both pre-sales and after-sales marketing. Allocating a significant budget to e-marketing activities was an important predictor of marketing success. This finding indicates that small businesses, in addition to understanding how to use social media tools for marketing, should set aside

sufficient resources to do so. The Eid and El-Gohary (2013) study began to firmly establish the importance of social media marketing for small businesses. However, the researchers recommended further investigation among other populations.

**Benefits of social media marketing.** In addition to the general findings discussed above, researchers have discussed several specific benefits of social media marketing in existing literature. For small businesses, one of the most important of these benefits is reducing costs. Many of the most prominent social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, are free to use, meaning that the only cost of marketing through social media is the time required to use the tools effectively (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Similarly, Kumar and Sundaram (2012) suggested that, even if social media use resulted in fewer consumers viewing marketing messages compared with distributing traditional fliers, the overall cost-benefit profile could still favor social media, owing to the low up-front price of social media messaging.

Supporting Kumar and Sundaram (2012), Harrigan et al. (2012) noted based on a review of existing literature that SMEs tend not to purchase complex software packages for customer relationship management and marketing, as larger enterprises might. The price, Harrigan et al. suggested, might be a factor in this decision, in addition to the inability of such software to adapt to SMEs' small-scale needs. This idea indicates that there is an opportunity for Internet-based tools, including social media tools, to meet the marketing needs of small businesses in a more cost-effective, scalable way. Similarly, Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) argued that social media is useful for small businesses because the necessary hardware, such as computers and Internet access, are often already

in place, allowing businesses to experiment with social media marketing without a significant up-front investment. Additionally, small businesses are more likely to adopt new marketing tools if they are compatible with their existing marketing strategies (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Further supporting the importance of social media marketing, one innovative study pointed to a potential benefit of social media marketing that could prove especially pertinent for small businesses. Brengman and Karimov (2012) investigated the relationship between social media presence and consumer trust in unknown e-retailers. The researchers created fictitious e-retail companies that were identical except for their presence or absence on a popular social media site and their possessing or not possessing a company blog on their respective websites. Brengman and Karimov examined 226 online shoppers' reactions to each iteration of the company. Their results showed that customer perceptions of benevolence and integrity increased when the company had a Facebook profile, and blogs increased participants' perceptions of integrity. The researchers concluded that, for businesses struggling to establish trust in their brand among new customers, social media could have significant value (Brengman & Karimov, 2012).

Although some Internet-based marketing tools do not involve the social component characteristic of social media, the use of social media in conjunction with these tools could prove especially beneficial for small businesses. For example, customer information management databases could allow a business to analyze data gathered from its social media interactions with customers (Harrigan et al., 2012) to track of previous

purchases and services. Such data could lead to increased ability to personalize service for particular customers, treat valued customers differently, predict customer behavior, and segment their market (Harrigan et al., 2012). By synthesizing existing research, Harrigan et al. (2012) determined that, by facilitating communication with customers, social media enables informal market research among small businesses that do not have the resources to conduct or commission formal research. In synthesis with the other studies reviewed in this subsection, the Brengman and Karimov (2012) and Harrigan et al. studies support the conclusion that social media marketing could significantly improve small business performance.

**Barriers to social media marketing implementation.** Social media marketing is appropriate for small businesses owing to its low cost, ease of use, and other benefits described previously; there are several challenges that might prevent businesses from getting started. Durkin et al. (2014) found that small businesses are hesitant to adopt new marketing strategies, and Harrigan et al. (2012) found further evidence of this tendency. The reasons for this hesitancy could be numerous, but Cronin-Gilmore (2012) suggested that a lack of training materials and knowledge resources could have an impact. Cronin-Gilmore also found that, among 20 small business owners in the United States, technology was one of the most frequently cited obstacles to marketing in general. Although the researcher did not provide further detail regarding the ways in which technology is an obstacle, the researcher implied that the financial cost of acquiring new technological resources was important (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). By contrast, other studies

have cited a lack of technological expertise among small business owner-managers (Harrigan et al., 2012).

Hesitancy to adopt social media marketing could result from obstacles beyond those related to technology, as suggested by Durkin et al. (2014) and Clark and Calli (2015). A theoretical article by Tuten and Angermeier (2013) provided a rare look at the potential negative consequences of social media marketing. The researchers considered social media marketing from the perspective of both consumers and brands. The researchers postulated that, for consumers, security breaches and loss of privacy are primary concerns, along with a distorted sense of self (e.g., if social media sharing leads to consumers' identification with brands), and a loss of control over online content. For brands, the biggest concerns are similar. Security breaches and loss of control over content could be problematic for brands as well as for consumers. Additionally, the authors pointed out that negative press could spread on social media platforms just as quickly as positive reviews, leading to a decrease in managers' ability to undertake damage control measures (Tuten & Angermeier, 2013).

In addition to these general barriers, there are some challenges specific to social media marketing that may prevent its adoption by small businesses. In their review of the literature, Harrigan et al. (2012) found a widespread perception among small business owners that, by introducing internet-based tools, they would risk damaging or losing their established face-to-face relationships. The researchers' study supported the existence of a negative perception of internet-based tools. The study took place among 1,445 SMEs in

Ireland, in which the researchers found that small business owners strongly valued existing relationships (Harrigan et al., 2011).

Several scholars have cited the medium- to long-term strategic direction required to implement social media marketing strategies as a barrier to social media implementation (Harrigan et al., 2012). Consistent with their tendency to focus on short-term marketing solutions, many small business owners have taken a similar approach to social media marketing (Harrigan et al., 2012). There is, as yet, very little evidence regarding the impact of short- versus long-term social media marketing strategies, especially among small businesses. In fact, some evidence suggests that social media can have a significant impact in the short term, both from the standpoint of small business and among social media users in general (Palmer & Huo, 2013). By contrast, Perrey, Spillecke, and Umblis (2013) asserted that optimizing ROI of social media marketing requires a long-term approach. Additionally, a 4-year longitudinal study conducted by Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) among the fastest-growing small businesses in the United States indicated that marketing managers at these successful startups tended to view social media as an integral part of their long-term marketing strategies.

Depending on the type of social media strategy used, there could be legal obstacles to its implementation in marketing. Researchers have discussed this issue primarily in European contexts, because many European nations have banned unsolicited electronic mail (Trzaskowski, 2014). Although it is still unclear whether governments should consider social media messages as electronic mail for legal purposes, the potential legal consequences of consumer-perceived privacy violations should be a consideration



among businesses considering social media entry (Tuten & Angermeier, 2013). Growing concerns over Internet safety and privacy suggest that small businesses should be aware of this issue, even in the United States. Small businesses often face resource limitations and liability concerns that could make any legal trouble particularly detrimental.

Finally, customer perception of Internet-based tools could present an obstacle to small businesses hoping to integrate social media into their marketing and purchasing (Harrigan et al., 2012). Many people are wary of divulging personal and financial details online, and customers prefer to have options other than social media available to them for contacting companies (Strategic Direction, 2013). The trepidation to divulge personal information is particularly important in the context of Facebook; a recent survey of 285 users indicated that only about 25% of users claim that they trust Facebook, and large minority lacks a high level of privacy awareness (O'Brien & Torres, 2012). Even within social media marketing, consumers have expressed a preference for controlling their interaction with businesses, rather than receiving targeted, unsolicited messages (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012; Watson et al., 2013). According to Kumar and Sundaram (2012), customers targeted by social media marketing may feel exploited and fear ostracism. Because of these potentially negative perceptions among consumers, business owners fear that, by engaging in social media marketing, they will lose customers (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). Taken together, the studies I reviewed in this section support the conclusion that small businessowners face a variety of barriers to social media marketing implementation.

**Social media marketing tools.** The most common social media tools used by small businesses are Facebook and e-mail (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014). Perhaps owing to their limited marketing resources, small businesses tend to leverage existing technologies, such as e-mail, instead of learning or acquiring new ones (Harrigan et al., 2012). In one study of the benefits of social media marketing among SMEs, Nobre and Silva (2014) determined that SME owners viewed Facebook as the most useful social media tool available. The researchers discovered that small businesses could use Facebook to facilitate communication with customers and to broaden brand awareness. Additionally, they found that social media marketing using Facebook was available to small businesses without large advertising budgets (Nobre & Silva, 2014). Increased sales and improved relationships with customers are among the potential positive results of social media marketing.

A study conducted by Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) provided robust information on the degree to which small business marketing managers are familiar with various social media tools, as well as the degree to which business owners implement them. Facebook was the most popular tool. Eighty-seven percent of respondents, all of them responsible for marketing at companies on the 2010 *Inc. 5000* index of fast-growing private businesses, claimed to be very familiar with the social network. Twitter, a microblogging site, and social network, was the next most common, with 71% of respondents claiming strong familiarity (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Results for the other social media tools investigated were as follows: blogging, 61%; online video, 44%; MySpace, 44%; message/bulletin boards, 43%; podcasting,

36%; and Foursquare, 19% (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). The percentage of respondents familiar with these technologies had increased since 2009, with the exceptions of blogging and podcasting, which experienced declining familiarity. The relatively widespread use of social media tools contrasts with Durkin et al.'s (2013) suggestion that small business owners are hesitant to adopt new marketing techniques. To explain this conflict, one should remember that Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) conducted their study among fast-growing small businesses, perhaps indicating that higher adoption of social media tools leads to growth.

In addition to examining the degree to which *Inc. 5000* marketing managers were familiar with various social media tools, Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) also asked which tools the marketing managers used at the time of the study. Results indicated that 71% of respondents used Facebook, 59% used Twitter, 50% used blogging, 33% used online video, and 33% used message boards. Less than one-third of participants used the other technologies (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). In addition to shedding light on the current state of social media marketing in small business, these results indicate a gap in social media use. With respect to all technologies, more respondents indicated a familiarity with social media tools than indicated making use of those tools. The Barnes and Jacobsen finding raises an interesting question regarding the importance of social media and barriers to adopting social media marketing. I discuss some potential barriers later in this section.

One case study also demonstrated the PU of Facebook. The case was that of a family-owned business whose operations were online only (Strategic Direction, 2013). The business dramatically increased its sales when the owners used Facebook. Many of

the company's target customers, the authors pointed out, were already Facebook members, so the owners were able to establish communication with its audience with ease. However, some of the business' customers were not willing to use Facebook as the sole means of communication with the company, so the authors cautioned that small businesses should operate multiple communication channels simultaneously.

In general, however, the case study demonstrated the value of word of mouth marketing on the Facebook platform for small businesses (Strategic Direction, 2013). This finding is in agreement with Kumar and Sundaram (2012), who recommended passive social sharing, and with Durkin et al. (2013), who indicated that small business owners often adopt new strategies with feelings of anxiety. Taken together, these studies suggest that, if small business owners perceived Facebook and other social media as tools to enhance their existing word of mouth marketing strategies, they might be less hesitant to try them.

Kumar and Sundaram (2012) reported on the top social networks worldwide. In line with small business' perceptions and preferences, Facebook is one of the top social media tools, with 800 million active users in 2012 and 802 million by March, 2014 (Boulos & Anderson, 2014). Twitter, which allows users to post short updates, pictures, and videos, and to categorize their posts using *hashtags* (denoted by the '#' symbol), is another important platform, with over 140 million active users in 2012. The next largest platforms and their user bases as of 2012 were as follows: YouTube, over 800 million unique visitors per month; LinkedIn, over 150 million users; Google+, 90 million users; and Groupon, over 50 million subscribers (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). In addition,

Kumar and Sundaram indicated that Facebook and Twitter were the most important social media tools for businesses because they had the largest impact on word of mouth sharing and the largest influence on purchasing decisions. The Kumar and Sundaram argument echoes Kourti's (2015) finding that Twitter is the most useful social media tool for newly formed businesses.

Small businesses have used social coupon services like Groupon extensively to draw in new customers. These tools allow businesses to issue coupons or free trial services to a predetermined number of subscribers to social coupon networks. Users purchase the coupons directly from the social coupon websites, and the coupons become valid after consumers have made the set number of purchases (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). According to Kumar and Sundaram (2012), who researched the benefits of social coupons for small businesses, customer retention rates among social coupon users are lower than among other first-time customers.

Low customer retention rates present a problem because customer retention is necessary for businesses to recover the shortfall in profits that they incur during social coupon launches (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). The businesses in their study took up to 100 months to recover these shortfalls, and the best implementation strategies reduced shortfalls by only about 1%. As a result, Kumar and Sundaram (2012) concluded that social coupons are inadequate on both short- and long-term scales as a marketing strategy for small businesses. Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) did not indicate that social coupons are a widely used technique among fast-growing small businesses. Taken together, these

studies suggest that small businesses have an adequate perception of the usefulness of social coupons.

### **Perceptions of Social Media Marketing in Small Businesses**

Although there is a growing body of research related to consumers' perceptions of social media (e.g., Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016; Watson et al., 2015), the literature search for this review yielded very little research specifically addressing the perceptions of social media among small business populations. However, researchers have occasionally incorporated perception of the utility of social media marketing into broader studies. For example, in their influential study of marketing managers at *Inc. 5000* companies, Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) asked participants how important social media was to their overall business and marketing strategies. The researchers conducted interviews four times over a 5-year period. In 2007, the second year, 26% of respondents indicated that social media was very important to their overall strategies. This number rose steadily, to 45% in 2009 and 56% in 2010. By 2010, only 13% of participants said social media was very unimportant or somewhat unimportant. The change shows that the perception of social media's importance is growing, particularly among successful, fast-growing small businesses (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Barnes and Jacobsen (2013) also examined small businesses' perceptions of the effectiveness of social media marketing. Overwhelmingly, participants responded that social media marketing had been effective. In 2010, 82% of those who used Twitter described their Twitter use as successful, and 84% of those who used Facebook felt that it had been successful. Although the researchers did not provide information on how the

participants had arrived at these conclusions or how participants were determining success, this finding suggests an overall positive perception of social media marketing efforts among small business marketing managers (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).

Another important study on this topic, which Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) conducted, suggested a more reservedly positive perception of Twitter among small business employees. Like Barnes and Jacobsen (2013), Bulearca and Bulearca focused on employees in the marketing and public relations departments. They drew their sample from small and medium firms in Romania and the United Kingdom; they selected two participants from each firm and conducted one-on-one, semi structured interviews to examine perceptions and use of Twitter as a marketing tool. Respondents listed networking, relationship building, and e-word of mouth as primary benefits available from the use of Twitter. However, they expressed caution in using Twitter for these purposes, noting that Twitter use could have negative consequences if confidential information becomes public or if users say negative things about a business (Bulearca & Bulearca, 2010).

These interesting findings shed light on some potential reasons that small business marketing decision makers might not perceive Twitter (and, by extension, other social media marketing tools) entirely favorably. Additionally, the Bulearca and Bulearca (2010) study is important because the researchers used a qualitative research method to study perceptions of social media marketing in a small business environment, setting a positive precedent for this study. Readers should note, however, that the researchers reported only on their pilot study, with results unavailable at the time of this review.

Further, the results appeared in 2010, which, while still considered current for most purposes, represents a time when Twitter was more nascent than it is today. Therefore, additional research on Twitter as a social media-marketing tool may be prudent. Some recent research has found that Twitter, among other social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn, is more useful for start-up businesses because of the ease of connecting with other users (Kourti, 2015). However, empirical research also shows that using multiple social media enhances the benefits of social media marketing (Kourti, 2015).

A more recent study focused on issues of privacy in social media use. Humphreys and Wilken (2015) discussed the use of Foursquare, a social network that allows users to indicate when they have patronized certain businesses, sometimes sharing real-time information about their locations. The researchers conducted group interviews with a sample of small business owners in New York and Sydney to investigate how they perceived and navigated privacy concerns on the use of Foursquare and other social media in engaging and serving customers. They considered the small business owners as both creators and consumers of social media content, focusing in particular on the business trend of buying and selling consumer information generated through social media (Humphreys & Wilken, 2015). They concluded that there is little uniformity in small business owners' approach to information privacy as it pertains to social media use. However, participants tended to feel more strongly about the protection of information consumers shared with them on social media than about information shared with others. Thus, whereas participants had found value in purchased consumer information, they hesitated to sell their customers' information to others (Humphreys & Wilken, 2015). The



Humphreys and Wilken (2015) finding emphasizes the personal nature of consumers' social-media-based relationships with businesses.

In addition to marketing, social media also has other purposes, including monitoring consumers' use of business assets (Humphreys & Wilken, 2015) and brand and talent management. Kaur, Sharma, Kaur, and Sharma (2015) examined perceptions of social media for these uses among a sample of 147 employees of small ( $n = 12$ ) and medium ( $n = 8$ ) IT companies in India. The Kaur et al. (2015) study involved quantitative analysis of questionnaires consisting of separate measures for employer attractiveness, a five-dimensional employer branding construct, and social media. Their results demonstrated a significant ( $p < .01$ ) association between social media use and all five dimensions of employer branding, which included economic value, social value, and innovation value. Kaur et al. focused on all employees of small and medium firms, which was appropriate to their study because they were interested in employees' perceptions of their workplaces as a function of social media. This choice, however, makes it impossible to draw conclusions about the perceptions of social media among business owners and other decision makers. This study accordingly focused on small business owners, who have the power to engage in or avoid social media use, both for marketing and other uses.

Although Kaur et al. (2015) addressed employer branding and attractiveness rather than marketing, their study is interesting because it is one of only a few to consider perceptions of social media from the perspective of employees of small businesses. The results suggest that employees of small businesses have a favorable impression of social media in general. However, it remains to be determined whether this positive general

impression will translate to perceptions of social media marketing more specifically. Barnes' and Jacobsen's (2013) findings support a favorable marketing perception, but further research is required to understand whether their result holds in other settings and to more clearly understand how small business owners assess the success of social media marketing.

The lack of research related to small business owner-managers' and marketing managers' perceptions of social media marketing represents a significant gap in existing literature. To understand what prevents small businesses from adopting social media strategies, researchers should examine this area. Furthermore, providing effective knowledge resources to small businesses, as Cronin-Gilmore (2012) recommended, requires an understanding of how business owners use social media marketing and what perceived barriers they face. Without addressing the specific perceptions and requirements of small business owners, training materials could lack impact and effectiveness (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012).

### **Summary**

This review of existing literature related to the topic of social media marketing in small business revealed that, while the research interest in social media marketing has increased in recent years, researchers still lack a clear understanding of some related issues. In particular, researchers have only begun to examine the extent to which small businesses engage in social media marketing. Due to the rapid rate of change in social media tools and technologies, older research in this area may no longer be relevant, indicating a need for ongoing study. The results of Barnes' and Jacobsen's (2013)

important work demonstrate this need. The researchers showed that social media use among small businesses can change rapidly, with particular tools falling into and out of favor over a period of only a few short years.

Scholars seem to concur that social media marketing is an effective marketing and customer relationship-management strategy for small businesses. However, scholars disagree regarding which social media tools are the most effective and which strategies business owners should employ in using them. Some have argued that particular social media tools like social coupon services could be detrimental to small businesses (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). Additionally, despite the broad agreement that social media marketing is positive, scholars do not agree regarding the best way to measure the impact of social media marketing (Kumar & Sundaram, 2012).

Many of the studies related to social media marketing in small business have taken place outside the United States. Furthermore, the literature search undertaken for this review yielded no articles related to the differences in social media's influence and use across countries. This significant literature gap indicates a need for further study related to social media marketing among small businesses in the U.S. and a comparison with findings from other locations. Furthermore, existing studies have often used single case studies or small sample sizes, making it difficult to draw general conclusions. Therefore, researchers should use larger sample sizes in the future.

Another major gap in research relates to the perception of social media among small business populations. Although some evidence supports the conclusion that successful small businesses view social media marketing as important (Barnes

& Jacobsen, 2013), other scholars have indicated that there may be resistance among small business owners to adopt new marketing strategies (Harrigan et al., 2012; Durkin et al., 2013). Small business owners' perceptions of social media, therefore, require clarification through further research.

### **Transition**

In this section, I introduced this qualitative, multiple case study related to social media marketing and small business. The purpose of this study was to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois must overcome to be competitive. Social media websites influence consumer trust in businesses and trust accounts for about 37% of consumer purchasing decisions (Hajli, 2014); yet small businesses lag behind Fortune 500 firms and other large corporations in adopting these marketing technologies (Ratliff & Kunz, 2014; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). The lag presents a problem because small businesses provide nearly half of all jobs in the private sector (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016), so, if small businesses fail because of an inability to compete with more technologically sophisticated competitors, the United States economy could suffer. To address the problem of small business competition failure, I used in-depth interviews and documentary evidence to examine the use of social media marketing among small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois. The TAM served as the conceptual framework.

In addition, Section 1 contained the research question, interview questions, and definitions of key terms, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. I presented a review of the professional and academic literature related to the research topic, including social

media marketing, small business marketing, and perceptions of social media marketing. In Section 2, I describe the research project in detail, including the role of the researcher, the participants, the research method and design, data collection and analysis procedures, ethical considerations, reliability, and validity. Section 3 includes a presentation of the findings, as well as a description of the application to professional practice and implications for change.

## Section 2: The Project

In this section, I present this research project, beginning with a restatement of the purpose. Next, I describe the role of the researcher, method, and design, population and sampling, and measures to ensure ethical research. Descriptions of data collection, organization, and analysis techniques, along with reliability and validity, follow.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois must overcome to be competitive. To address the problem, it was necessary to (a) explore the nature of small businesses' use of social media and (b) explore small business owners' perceptions of the barriers they face to implementing social media as a marketing strategy. The TAM (Davis, 1989) served as the conceptual framework of this study.

The previous section of the study contained a presentation of the problem and a detailed review of the literature regarding the use of social media in marketing as well as obstacles to the use of social media in small business marketing. This study followed a multiple case study approach, which is a method of investigating a phenomenon in depth and in context (Yin, 2013). The methodology and design of this study are the topics of this section, along with the research question, the interview guide used for interviewing the participants, the population and sample, and the data collection and analysis procedures as well as protection of participants.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher in this study was that of the observer, interviewer, transcriber, and data analyst. I am not involved professionally in the retail clothing industry. According to Stake (2013), researchers in case study research are guests of the entities under study and consequently have an obligation to behave both ethically and courteously while conducting their research. For this study, I obtained permission to look at the companies' social media sites and posts and deidentified electronic media materials used as data (e.g., blog posts, Yin, 2013). I mitigated potential bias by engaging in member checking of interview transcripts and by using a predeveloped interview guide to prevent myself from asking questions that might tend to bias participants' answers. Interviews were justified for the present study because I hoped to understand participants' perspectives at a rich level and because a multiple case study approach requires the collection of as many different types of data as possible. In accordance with the Belmont Report, I adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice by seeking informed consent, assessing risks and benefits, and selecting subjects in accordance with ethical principles, respectively. I have presented a detailed description of the ethical assurances later in this chapter.

### **Participants**

I identified potential cases in several ways. The first way was by cross-referencing Hoover's (Hoovers.com) most current list of the small retail clothing businesses located in Chicago with the City of Chicago's Business License Look-Up page (cityofchicago.org). Hoover's is a division of Dun & Bradstreet and provides data

such as company size, revenue, and other statistics. The City of Chicago's Business License Look-Up page enables searchers to look for businesses with a current City of Chicago business license. These two strategies ensured that (a) the target population of cases resides within downtown Chicago and (b) the potential cases meet the criterion of being a small business. Using the list of companies that appeared on both lists, I randomly selected 20 companies in the retail-clothing sector and searched the Internet for evidence of these companies' use of social media. I retained only those companies for which evidence of social media presence existed; this produced a list of potential cases that met the study criteria. This strategy aligned with current recommendations for multiple case study (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

I sent a letter to owners of those companies that met the criteria for the research, asking them to participate in the study. The first three companies whose owners consented to participate became units of study. More owners than necessary consented to participate, so I retained their names and contact information in case initial participants dropped out of the study (see Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). I conducted the study among the first three businesses that agreed to participate. If I had been unable to locate three retail-clothing businesses willing to participate in the study, I would have repeated the sampling procedure among retail businesses in another sector (such as cosmetics or jewelry). To establish working relationships with participants, I conversed casually with participants to get to know them and to introduce myself before beginning formal interviews. I began the formal interviews after I had established a rapport with each participant.



## **Research Method and Design**

### **Research Method**

In this research, I used a qualitative research design because my goal was to obtain rich, in-depth data. Rich data provide readers with a detailed picture of the phenomenon under investigation, considering not just facts but also attitudes, emotions, and contextual factors relevant to the research topic (Yin, 2015). Rich data were important to this research because I sought to understand participants' perceptions of and attitudes toward social media marketing with the goal of identifying barriers to social media marketing implementation. According to Yin (2015), qualitative research is most appropriate when a researcher wants to investigate a topic in depth. I chose the case study approach to understand a particular issue, the nature of small businesses' use of social media, by using multiple case studies to highlight that issue. My choice of case study approach aligned with scholars' recommendations that case study is appropriate to understand a particular issue in depth (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). A quantitative design would not have been appropriate to this study because I did not seek to establish or test relationships among measurable variables (Davis et al., 2013; Punch, 2013; Yin, 2013).

### **Research Design**

Rule and John (2015) noted several ways of conducting case studies and recommended Stake's (2013) procedure. The following outlines Stake's procedure and explains how I implemented it in this study. I also discuss Yin's (2013) recommendations throughout what follows. Stake's procedure consists of five steps:

1. Determine the appropriateness of a case study approach to answering the research question
2. Identify the case or cases through some purposive sampling strategy
3. Design the data collection strategy
4. Decide on the type of analysis
5. Interpret the findings (Stake, 2013).

First, a case study approach is appropriate when researchers have a clear case or cases with defined boundaries and intend either to provide an in-depth account of a single case or to make comparisons across multiple cases. Yin (2013) emphasized the importance of bounding the cases and determining the type of case study before proceeding to the sampling step. In this research, the cases were small business enterprises in the retail clothing industry of downtown Chicago that made use of social media for marketing purposes. A multiple case study approach is research in which multiple cases illustrate a central issue or concern (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). Yin indicated that multiple case studies enable researchers to make comparisons between and across cases. In this study, I tried to find out about and make comparisons about a phenomenon, use of social media in small businessmarketing, by looking at some cases drawn from the retail clothing businesses.

Second, I used purposive sampling to obtain a sample (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2015). Because I wished to explore the ways small retail clothing businesses in Chicago may employ social media as a marketing tool, I needed to select enterprises that had some

presence on social media. I describe the specific sampling steps in the subsection entitled *Population and Sampling*.

Third, Yin (2013) proposed three principles of data collection, which I followed in this study. The first principle is a collection of multiple sources of evidence. According to Farquhar (2012), case study research is beneficial owing to the number of different data sources that a researcher can use. Yin described six potential sources of primary evidence for case studies (documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts), arguing that researchers should use as many of these sources as possible in case studies, but need not use all six. In this research, I used in-depth interviews, documents (existing informational resources related to small business social media marketing), and direct observations of the social media sites and social media postings (e.g., blog posts, LinkedIn posts) of the subject enterprises. Social media evidence is observable, rather than documentary, evidence because social media sites can change frequently and, therefore do not meet the stability criterion for document evidence (Yin, 2013). Yin emphasized triangulation and convergence of data sources, which I address in the subsection, entitled *Data Analysis Technique*.

Yin's (2013) second principle of data collection is to create a case study database. For this study, I created a database consisting of interview transcripts, interview notes, observation notes, screen captures of observed social media activity, collected documents, and notes on collected documents. I organized information in this database in a way that facilitated comparison of the multiple cases.

Yin's (2013) third principle is maintaining a chain of evidence. The researcher maintains a chain of evidence by including in the case study database information regarding when and how the researcher collects information, as well as referencing the case study database in the final report. The specific data collection procedures appear in the subsection entitled *Data Collection Procedures* in this section.

Fourth, according to Stake (2013), the data analysis strategy of a case study involves a detailed description of the case or cases that may include the history, sequence of events or daily account of activities of the case, followed by an analysis of themes in order to illustrate the issues involved in the case. When multiple cases are the focus of the study, a typical analysis involves first a detailed depiction and analysis of each case and its associated themes (within-case analysis), followed by an analysis of themes across cases (cross-case analysis), which includes interpretation of the significance or meaning of the case (Stake, 2013). Yin (2013) warned against considering the data sources and associated findings separately, so all three data sources were simultaneously involved in the analysis of each case. Following Yin, I ensured that data converged to form overall understandings of each case and comparisons between and among the cases.

In the fifth and final step of case study research, researchers interpret the study findings in the context of the research questions guiding the study as well as in the context of the existing literature (Yin, 2013). The result of such a discussion is to produce theory from knowledge gained through practice (Pettigrew, 2013) of the case study participants and to answer questions regarding how and why participants use social media marketing. Following Yin (2013), I reported results of the case study in an unstructured

manner because the order is not meaningful. The unstructured format allowed me to draw comparisons between and among the cases to develop a robust understanding of the theme under investigation (Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). The results of this research may provide an in-depth understanding of the nature of social media marketing by small businesses; such understanding may lead to recommendations that can help similar enterprises use social media to increase market share and improve their chances of survival. Following Fusch and Ness (2015), I ensured data saturation by asking all participants the same interview questions, triangulating data collection using multiple sources for case study, and conducting the interview coding process in stages until further coding was no longer feasible. In case study research, these methods of achieving data saturation are more relevant and practical than sample-size-based methods (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Population and Sampling**

Small retail clothing businesses located in downtown Chicago, Illinois comprised the population of interest. Three small businesses making use of at least one type of social media as defined in the previous section comprised the sample. The sampling technique was purposive sampling, which is a form of nonprobability sampling (Robinson, 2014; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). I described the sampling criteria in the Participants section. Purposive sampling permitted me to choose the participants based on researcher-determined criteria, in this case, being a small retail clothing business in Chicago with at least one form of social media presence. An advantage of purposive sampling is that it permits a researcher to focus on cases that pertain to the phenomenon

of interest (Patton, 1990; Robinson, 2014; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). Because of time and data management constraints, as well as possible difficulty accessing all possible cases, it was not feasible to use a large sample. However, the three cases represented an adequate sampling for this type of study; as Yin (2013) indicated, if the phenomenon researchers wish to examine is straightforward, two or three cases is probably sufficient. If the phenomenon is complex or researchers intend to achieve certainty, the sample may be as many as four to six cases (Yin, 2013).

Because this method of obtaining a sample carried the risk that owners on the list may not have responded to my inquiry, I planned an additional method of recruiting a sample as well. The second way was to review LinkedIn.com interest groups with the term *small business* in their names, using the location filter *Chicago* to limit the results geographically. Reviewing LinkedIn.com was appropriate to this study because I was interested in small businesses in the downtown Chicago area, and LinkedIn.com provided a way to contact a large group of potential participants at the same time, advertising the study publicly in the event that not enough participants responded to the initial inquiry. However, using LinkedIn.com was not necessary, as I received sufficient response to the initial inquiry.

I interviewed at least one owner of each participating business. In addition, I requested interviews with co-owners of participating business, in cases where businesses had more than one owner. Therefore, the sample size was three. Due to time and resource constraints, I limited the research to three businesses.

### **Ethical Research**

I sought and obtained permission to conduct the study from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I used no deception, and offered assurances of confidentiality before and during the research process. I mailed an informed consent form to all participants prior to the interview; participants signed and returned the form to me before the interview.

I did not seek or obtain demographic or personally identifying information, and presented all published results confidentially to de-identify the data. At the beginning of each interview, before beginning data collection, I gave participants several ethical assurances. Specifically, I informed participants of their rights to withdraw at any time. Appendix A contains the script I followed to inform participants of their right to withdraw. In addition, I informed participants, at the beginning of each interview, that they should feel free to decline to answer any question that makes them uncomfortable. Appendix A contains the script I followed to inform participants of their right to decline to answer any questions. Further, I gave participants specific instructions for contacting me by phone, should they wish to withdraw from participation after the interviews took place. Appendix A contains the script I followed to give participants specific instructions to contact me. I gave each participant my business card, which included my phone number, so that the participants could contact me at will. There were no incentives for participation in the study; I informed participants that I offered no incentive, both in my script prior to the interview (Appendix A) and in the informed consent letter. Additionally, I provided all the ethical assurances listed in this section to participants in a

written, informed consent form, which I asked the participants to sign before commencing data collection.

I ensured ethical protection of participants as follows. After each interview, I placed all recordings and notes used to collect data in a locked cabinet accessible to me only. I personally transcribed the interviews and stored them in a password-protected memory device, where they will remain for 5 years, after which I will destroy all raw data by shredding. Destroying data after 5 years conforms to current recommendations (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013; Yin, 2013). Only the research committee and I had access to the raw data. I protected the names of participants' organizations and individuals by using pseudonyms in the research report and de-identifying all data (Ritchie et al, 2013). A third party research consultancy confirmed adequate de-identification of data by reviewing the final research report (Ritchie et al., 2013).

The IRB approval number for this study was 12-13-16-0192468. The consent letter contained Walden's IRB approval stamp. After completion of the research, I will maintain the data in a safe place for 5 years to protect confidentiality of participants.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

As the researcher, I acted as the primary data collection instrument. As noted previously, I used four types of data in conducting the case studies (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). One type of data was in-depth interviews of the business owners who consented to participate. The second type of data was documentary evidence gathered from Internet and library searches of existing informational resources designed to help small businesses use social media marketing. The third type of data was direct



observations of participant businesses' real-time social media presence and use of social media marketing (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

Examples of relevant social media include blog posts on a company web site and Twitter, LinkedIn, or Facebook postings by owners or designated company employees. The fourth type of data was archival records provided by participants. These consisted of marketing materials containing information related to participant businesses' social media marketing activities, as well as other internal documentation of marketing strategies. I asked participant business owners to provide the fourth type of data. I enhanced the reliability and validity of data by subjecting interview transcripts and coding results to member checking, in line with recommendations in existing research (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). The interview protocol is in Chapter 1 and in Appendix A. I used four different data sources because Yin (2013) recommended using as many data types as possible for multiple case study research. In the section that follows, I described each type of data and list the advantages and disadvantages of each.

### **Data Collection Technique**

In this section, I describe the data collection technique, including advantages and disadvantages, for each of the four types of data that I collected for this study. Each of these four data types (interviews, existing resources, social media, and internal data) was collected for each case to ensure triangulation. In other words, each case independently consists of four types of data, so that triangulation occurs within each case. The following section describes how I organized the data.

## **Interviews**

Before conducting the interviews, I called each participant to schedule a convenient time to conduct the interview. Interviews occurred face-to-face in a quiet, public location such as a library conference room. Because I live in Chicago, it was possible to conduct all interviews in person. At the beginning of in-person interviews, I informed each participant regarding the purpose of the interview and asked for permission to record the session. On the day of the interview, I took a recording device, pen, paper, interview guide sheet, and signed statement of informed consent to the interview room. After confirming the participant's consent, I turned on the recording device and began the interview. When all interviews were complete, I transcribed all recordings at my residence. Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, after which I analyzed it qualitatively to identify key themes. I used Nvivo to enter the data and assist in the data analysis, in line with recommendations in existing research (see Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

An advantage of interviews is that they enabled me to collect rich, qualitative data. A disadvantage of interviews is that there is a potential for bias if the interviewees told me what they thought wanted to hear. To mitigate this potential for bias, I developed rapport with participants before beginning the formal interview, and I explicitly encouraged participants to be open and candid in their answers. I used a researcher-designed interview guide sheet to elicit rich data regarding participants' perceptions and experiences about the use of social media as a marketing tool. The interview questions consisted of nine open-ended, exploratory items (Table 1). This approach gives

participants the opportunity to expand their responses and allows researchers to ask follow-up questions to develop more in-depth responses (Pettigrew, 2013). Owing to time and resource constraints, I did not conduct a pilot study.

I designed the interview guide. To ensure that data are accurate and valid, I engaged in member checking, in alignment with current recommendations for qualitative research (Punch, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013; Yin, 2015). At the same time, I asked participants to read interview transcripts to determine whether their intended meanings came across. After reviewing the transcripts, participants had the opportunity to make changes to their comments, to add comments, and to remove anything they did not wish to appear in the study.

### **Existing Resources**

To locate existing informational resources designed to assist small businesses in the use of social media marketing, I conducted Internet searches using both scholarly databases and general Internet search engines, in alignment with current recommendations about case study (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). Additionally, I visited small business resource centers and public libraries in the downtown Chicago area to locate print materials. I collected resulting resources and made notes on their content, storing these notes in the case study database. Criteria for inclusion in the study were as follows: the documents specifically target social media marketing, the documents specifically address small business populations, the documents date no earlier than 2009, and the documents are available at no cost to small business owners in the downtown Chicago area. These documents consist of only one source of

data for each case. Each case has other sources of data, namely, interviews, social media, and internal data.

During the data analysis phase, I compared existing resources with participants' needs to determine any gaps in resource content and availability. An advantage of using existing resources is that they allow me to investigate the current state of available resources related to marketing for small businesses in Chicago. A disadvantage of existing resources is that they may or may not reflect the reality of social media marketing as it is understood by small business participants. I mitigated this disadvantage by comparing existing resources to the interview transcripts to determine whether participants use existing resources and whether existing resources are relevant to participants' situations. Using multiple data sources to fully understand a phenomenon is in alignment with current recommendations (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

### **Social Media**

The third source of data in this study was a review of social media applications used by each company. These included a review of blogs and other information presented on the company web site, Twitter feeds, and Facebook or LinkedIn pages maintained by the company. The purpose of this review was to describe and characterize the nature of each case company's social media usage as a marketing tool. Data included de-identified screenshots, blog posts, and similar materials. Additionally, data included my notes on participant businesses' social media marketing, to be stored in the case study database. An advantage of social media is that it provides me with direct information on participants' social media marketing use. A disadvantage is that social media sites change

rapidly, and future researchers will not be able to replicate this data collection. I mitigated this disadvantage by thoroughly describing the social media sites I collect in the final research report. Researchers recommend thorough description as a procedure for mitigating disadvantage from rapid change (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

### **Internal Data**

The fourth source of data in this study was internal documentation from each of the participant businesses. Using internal documentation as a data source is in alignment with current recommendations for case study data collection (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). Relevant internal documentation could include marketing materials related to social media marketing, as well as documentation detailing internal marketing strategy or social media marketing plans. To gather internal data, I requested documentation from each interview participant after the completion of each interview. Because this internal documentation is sensitive in nature, I assured participants that the specific contents of documents in the research report would not be accessible to anyone. Assuring participants that the contents of their documents will remain confidential is in alignment with current ethical recommendations for case study (Punch, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013; Yin, 2015). This technique allows me to gain a more robust perspective on participants' marketing behaviors. The disadvantage is that participants could feel uncomfortable revealing sensitive business information. I mitigated this disadvantage by assuring participants of the confidentiality of the materials they provided.

### **Data Organization Technique**

I used a research log for record-keeping purposes and assigned each interview a number that I recorded in the research log, in alignment with theorists' recommendations (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2015). I will store the log and recordings of the interviews in a locked cabinet in my home for 5 years, after which I will physically destroy them. I transcribed the interviews using Microsoft Word, and stored them on a password-protected memory device kept in the same cabinet as the recordings. Each transcript had the same number as that of the interview. I referred to participants anonymously (e.g., "Participant 1") and recorded that pseudonym in the research log. I used the research log to record individual depictions (see *Data Analysis Technique*).

I stored correspondence with participants, including signed consent forms, in the same locked cabinet as the research log, recordings, and transcripts. I will store all data in a password-protected memory device, where they will remain for 5 years, after which I will destroy all raw data by shredding, following current recommendations for participant protection (Ritchie et al., 2013; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). The advantages of the data collection technique are as follows: it allows me to use multiple sources of data to examine the multiple cases and it provides rich evidence from which to draw conclusions. The primary disadvantage of the data collection technique is that it is time consuming. I used member checking and asked participants to review transcripts to ensure that the transcripts were accurate and that final codes accurately reflected participants' meanings. Member checking involved asking the participants to review transcripts and codes, and make corrections or suggestions.

### **Data Analysis**

To address the research problem, I used the following primary research question to guide the study:

What barriers to social media marketing must owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois, overcome to be competitive?

Answering this research question involved investigating how business owners in the retail clothing industry in downtown Chicago perceive the use of social media for marketing and promotion, what social media tools small business owners regularly use for marketing purposes, and why they have chosen to use those tools. I also investigated what barriers participants reported to using social media marketing, as well as participants' perceptions of the benefit of social media to small business.

I followed the guidance of Yin (2013) regarding the conduct of multiple case study research. Additionally, I triangulated data by using multiple sources and through member checking, following Ritchie et al. (2013), Stake (2013), and Yin (2013). This guidance indicates that I develop a complete, individual case report for each unit of study prior to making cross-case comparisons or drawing cross-case conclusions. For this reason, data analysis consisted of five general steps: (1) analysis of interviews, (2) analysis of social media (observation analysis), (3) analysis of existing informational resources (documentary analysis), (4) writing of three individual case reports, and (5) cross-case comparison.

These steps were followed in sequential order and each is described in detail in the following subsections. The use of multiple data sources constitutes triangulation of

sources, one of the four methods of triangulation that Patton (1999) identified (see also Ritchie et al., 2013; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). After writing the individual case reports, I wrote the dissertation report, focusing on key themes that emerged from the data analysis. The final report also includes a discussion of how these key themes correlate with existing literature reviewed in Chapter 2. During this process, I conducted a second literature search to identify potential contributions to the literature published since writing Chapter 2. These contributions are discussed in the final report. Additionally, I consider how the findings conform with or diverge from the concepts of the TAM, which forms the theoretical framework for this study. I used NVivo and Excel software to perform data analysis.

### **Interviews**

I conducted qualitative analysis on the transcribed interview data, in which I:

1. Read and reread each transcript seeking to understand the viewpoint and experience of each participant individually.
2. Went through the transcripts individually to identify specific themes, focusing on the phenomenon that is the central question.
3. Wrote an individual depiction of each participant's experience and used member checking to ensure the validity and reliability of the depiction.
4. Wrote a revised description if member checking warranted it.

I present the results thematically to de-identify the data and to facilitate the presentation of both an overall experience and comparisons across cases. I also note unexpected or unique themes in the results in order to preserve divergent views and ensure the richness



of the data, in alignment with current recommendations (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013).

### **Social Media**

I used open coding and thematic analysis of the social media to develop an independent picture of the ways in which each company uses the media for marketing purposes, in alignment with current recommendations (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). The purpose of this analysis was to understand the nature of the companies' usage of social media, such as frequency of posts, differences and similarities between the companies that may be related to industry sector, use of promotions (e.g., coupons), and linkage between social media accounts and the companies' web sites, among others.

### **Existing Resources**

I used open coding and thematic analysis of the existing resources to develop an understanding of the nature of available resources and of whether the available resources meet small businesses' needs, following Rule and John (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2013). To achieve this goal, I developed themes to reflect the type (print, online), content (e.g., marketing strategies, social media statistics), and social media tools (Twitter, Facebook, etc.) in the resources. Developing themes allowed me to compare participants' stated or implied needs with existing resources to make recommendations, such as for distribution of documentation or creation of new documentation, which could help small businesses effectively engage in social media marketing.

**Internal Data**

Yin (2013) suggested collecting archival data in case study research. Internal documents provided by participants satisfied this requirement. During interviews, I asked participants to provide archival internal data relevant to their social media marketing activities. They had the option to present copies of archival documents in person, via e-mail, or via postal mail, with a deadline of two weeks from the date of the interview. Such data included copies of memos and policies pertaining to social media marketing. Any documents I received were stored in a file that I kept specific to each case, and to an internal data subfile within that file. This strategy helped me keep the data organized. To analyze archival data, I sorted internal documents gathered into categories (e.g., marketing plans and other marketing materials). Then, I identified patterns and conclusions from each category of archival data, making comparisons across cases, following Rule and John (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2013).

**Individual Case Report**

Following the recommendations of Yin (2013), I synthesized the observations of social media with the interview data to produce an individual case report for each company. Each report consisted of an individual depiction of the company background, social media usage for marketing, participants' perspectives on social media in marketing, and a synthesis and summary. Due to the sensitive nature of archival data collected for this study, no specific, identifying information from records provided by participants were included in the individual case reports, following the recommendations of Rule and John (2015), Stake (2013), and Yin (2013).

### **Cross-case Comparison**

After completing the individual case reports, I used thematic analysis to develop comparative information regarding the cases, following current recommendations (Rule & John, 2015; Stake, 2013; Yin, 2013). First, I read each report and noted areas of similarity and difference. After marking these areas, I assigned the areas noted to overarching categories and presented these thematically and comparatively. Finally, I wrote cross-case conclusions and recommendations.

### **Reliability and Validity**

I ensured data saturation by asking all participants the same interview questions, triangulating data collection using multiple sources for case study, and conducting the interview coding process in stages until further coding was no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In case study research, these methods of achieving data saturation are more relevant and practical than sample-size-based methods (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Reliability**

In qualitative studies, dependability indicates reliability. Dependability refers to the degree to which the research results reflect reality and persist through time and in different conditions (Yin, 2015). There are two approaches for dealing with dependability and credibility in interview methods: triangulation and respondent validation (member checking). Triangulation consists of the search for confirmation of several data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, and documents). Triangulation is limited because the accuracy of one method seldom reveals the inaccuracy of another (Pettigrew, 2013; Yin, 2015). I used triangulation in this research to develop data for a separate analysis of the

participating companies' use of social media. The second approach, respondent validation or member checking, involves asking participants to comment on the accuracy of my depictions of them and their situations (da Mota Pedrosa, Näslund, & Jasmand, 2012). I used member checking and triangulation of sources to ensure credibility, in accord with Patton's (1999) recommendation.

There are two ways to perform member checking. In the first approach, participants comment on the final research product. In the second, participants comment on the accuracy of one or more interim documents, such as an interview transcript or individual depiction (Miles et al., 2013). There are limitations to member checking, especially commenting on the final product. First, research results must be consistent with the self-image of participants or the latter may repudiate them. Defensive participants may provide unclear responses if they feel uncomfortable with the depiction of themselves, whereas less defensive participants may be less likely to criticize, thereby reducing opportunities to correct inaccuracies. The second approach to member checking obviates some of these problems by allowing me to incorporate a participant's disagreement. In this study, I used member checking by asking participants to review the summary of their interview and to comment on them before I wrote up the final versions.

### **Validity**

In qualitative studies, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and data saturation indicate validity (Yin, 2015).

Credibility is the degree to which research results are believable (Yin, 2015).

Member checking, as described above in the subsection entitled "Reliability," constituted

a check of credibility. Additionally, I include in the final research report rich descriptions of the business contexts, without compromising participant confidentiality. Rich description contributes to credibility (Yin, 2015). Finally, process documentation is useful for discussing other points of view to show that I have taken them into account (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). For this reason, I recorded observations in the research log described in “Data Organization Techniques”.

Confirmability refers to the extent to which readers are able to confirm that the researcher has drawn accurate conclusions from the research data (Yin, 2015). I addressed confirmability by demonstrating in the final report that the results emerge from the data and not from my own interpretations or biases, as recommended in recent methodology scholarship (da Mota Pedrosa et al., 2012; Elo et al., 2014; Rule & John, 2015). I accomplished this by providing de-identified samples of participants’ statements in the report and by fully reporting the thematic coding and interpretation process. Additionally, when writing the final report, I was mindful of and candid about my potential biases, enabling readers to detect potentially biased interpretations; this process aligns with recommendations from Elo et al. (2014) and Rule and John (2015).

I ensured data saturation by asking all participants the same interview questions, triangulating data collection using multiple sources for case study, and conducting the interview coding process in stages until further coding does not reveal further information or is no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In case study research, these methods of achieving data saturation are more relevant and practical than sample-size-based methods (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Transition and Summary**

In this research, I explored the nature and extent of small business use of social media and explored small business owners' perceptions of the role of social media as a marketing strategy. In this section, I described in detail the data collection, management, and analysis procedures and addressed the appropriateness of the research design for this study. In addition, I discussed the population and sample, the recruitment and participant protection procedures. By contributing an understanding of perceived barriers among a sample of small business owners, the results of the study, which appear in a subsequent section, may help small business practitioners and researchers develop strategies that business leaders can implement to increase market share using social media. In section three, I present the findings of this research, describe their application to professional practice, discuss implications for social change, recommend actions and future research, and reflect on the study.

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

#### **Introduction**

I conducted this qualitative multiple case study research to investigate any barriers to the use of social media marketing that owners of small retail clothing businesses must overcome to be competitive. The experiences and perceptions of the case study participants provided a much broader range of valuable insights into the effective use of social media in this sector, as presented and discussed in this section.

I collected data using semistructured interviews with the respective owners of three small retail clothing businesses in Chicago who had experience with social media marketing in order to determine what barriers to social media marketing owners of small retail clothing businesses must overcome to be competitive. Two of the participants had been in business for around 4 to 5 years, and the third had operated a business for 15 years, but with a physical store for just the past 3 years.

I conducted thematic analysis of the interview data, facilitated by using NVivo qualitative analysis software. I ensured data saturation by conducting the interview coding process in stages until further coding was no longer feasible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). In case study research, conducting interviews in stages is more relevant and practical than sample-size-based methods (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

I present the findings by key themes in the following sections. I describe the ways in which these findings confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge in the discipline by comparing them with the results of peer-reviewed studies from the literature review. The findings revealed that the three small business owners interviewed in this study were all

making effective use of social media marketing. Although this involved considerable effort, they perceived that social media marketing has become a necessity to remain competitive in the small retail clothing sector, and that their social media marketing activities are effective in generating important exposure, sales, and overall value for their businesses. All interviewees reported that they were using a range of social media channels, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and demonstrated an awareness of the specific benefits of each channel in relation to their business and marketing needs.

Although the interviewees did not report experiencing insurmountable barriers to the use of social media for marketing purposes, their experiences provide important insights into the factors essential for success in this area. From participants' experiences, it is possible to infer several potential barriers to the effective use of social media marketing among small retail clothing businesses.

The first potential barrier consists of a lack of awareness and understanding of how to use various social media channels for marketing purposes. It was clear from the interviews that the research participants in this study had a good understanding of specific social media channels, the types of audiences that can be reached through specific social media channels, and how to utilize the channels in ways that raise awareness of the business and its products and generate sales. However, other small business owners who lack this type of knowledge and understanding are unlikely to be able to make effective use of social media marketing. The importance of awareness and understanding aligns with the PEOU dimension of the TAM, which was the conceptual



framework for this study. If small business owners do not understand social media tools, they probably do not perceive the social media tools as easy to use.

The second main potential barrier, which also aligns with the PEOU dimension of the TAM, relates to the time and effort required for effective social media marketing. The interviewees revealed that, although there are few direct costs involved in social media marketing, the indirect costs relating to the time involved in consistently using social media can be considerable. I concluded, therefore, that a lack of available time for social media usage can present another barrier for many small business owners who are already under considerable time pressure. In addition, the interviewees cited direct costs relating to the use of more advanced social media marketing functions, such as Facebook advertisements, which constrained the extent or types of social media marketing available to them.

The third main barrier relates to the lack of available training in social media marketing directed to small business owners. The research participants reported that they had mainly had to rely on their own efforts to become familiar with different social media tools and their functions; one specifically commented that the lack of affordable training is likely to be a barrier to social media marketing usage among other small business owners. The TAM does not capture this barrier with its dimensions of PU and PEOU (Davis, 1989). Instead, this finding supported the work of Caniëls et al. (2015) and Schaupp and Bélanger (2014). Both research teams found that extrinsic factors, such as lack of training, were more important to predict technology adoption than the TAM factors were.

In the following section, I discuss these findings in more detail and in the context of previous literature.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

#### **Perceived Benefits of Social Media Marketing**

I asked the interviewees, “How do you determine the types of marketing tools that are most effective for you?” and “What aspects of social media in general do you find most useful for your business?” Previous researchers have documented an increase in the perceived importance and effectiveness of social media marketing among small businesses (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013). The findings of the present study are important for providing insights into how small business owners themselves conceptualize the benefits of social media marketing and its impacts on their businesses.

Two main factors emerged as main influences on the choice of marketing methods among the case study participants: proven success and customer response. The participants indicated, for example, that they had been convinced of the importance of social media marketing by personal observations of the numbers of people using social media and the successful use of social media marketing by other small businesses in the retail clothing sector.

I always found boutiques myself on social media. So I said, Well, you know, if this is working for this store or that store, I may as well start to put pictures up.

(Participant 1)

With the response that Facebook got and the amount of followers that they gained so fast, I knew instantly that that is something I needed to learn. (Participant 2)

The interviewees also emphasized the importance of monitoring customer response to different marketing methods, based on numbers of inquiries and sales, for example, and tailoring their marketing practices to those shown to be effective in generating these, which included social media marketing.

By the response of my customers or potential customers. So, that's how I determine whether or not the marketing is working for me." (Participant 2)

You'll get a lot of out of state inquiries when you're on social media. So just by posting the picture on social media I might have an inbox from someone in New York who says, "Can you send me an invoice for those shoes? I want to buy them." So it works. It definitely works and that's how I got into it. (Participant 1)

These findings contrasted a little with those of Schaupp and Bélanger (2014), who found that employees' competence with technologies and pressure from consumers were the main predictors of social media use among small businesses. The lack of reference to technological competence in this study may be due, however, to the deliberate selection of case study businesses with an existing social media presence, in which the owners or employees might have good levels of technical ability.

Across the three interviews, I identified several key benefits of social media marketing: cost and convenience, ability to reach a large audience, and visual marketing, as discussed below. These findings expanded on the results of previous studies, which had mostly identified low cost as the main benefit of social media marketing for small businesses (e.g., Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). Among other factors, cost was indeed a

major benefit of social media marketing in the current study, and one of the reasons why participants started using this marketing practice:

I just felt like it was a cheaper way of advertising ... as a small business I can't afford to be listed in a newspaper, you know. I can't afford to be listed in a phonebook ... But what I can afford is, you know, setting up an ad on social media for maybe about \$5.00 a day. (Participant 2)

Because it was free, I have to tell the truth. (Participant 3)

Related to this, one of the participants stressed the convenience of being able to post material simultaneously to several different sites, at no additional cost, by using simple and readily available online applications:

The convenience of them all is that you can post from Instagram, and it can post directly to Facebook and Twitter in one post. So that's the convenience ... when you're a business owner, you don't have to go to one social media site and do it, they're all connected. And there are a lot of apps too .... you can use Hootsuite, you can use a bunch of different apps that put them all together when you're posting. (Participant 3)

The ability to reach a larger audience of potential customers was the second main perceived benefit of social media marketing identified by the participants in this study. They stressed the ease and speed with which they could disseminate social media posts, both within networks of potential customers in their existing locality and to a wider geographical audience who might order products online.

What social media offers is word of mouth. I mean, I can post a picture and someone else can share it on their page or they can tag someone who might be interested in it. So, I mean, for me it's just today's form of word of mouth, you know ... your neighbor can be 500 miles away, you know, that you just told about something. So, that helps your business grow. (Participant 2)

Because I could reach a broad spectrum of people in my area and of my already current friends that I already had on my regular Facebook page. (Participant 3)

Another reported main benefit of social media marketing more specific to the retail clothing industry is its suitability for effective visual marketing of products. As one of the participants explained, providing potential customers in this sector with clear images of the products is highly important in generating interest and sales; posting photos or videos on social media sites is an ideal way of achieving this.

I've realized that social media is very lucrative when you're marketing your product mainly because doing retail, my customer likes to see things in the visual aspect ... If I can't get it out to my customer, they can't actually see it, then ... they're not as fast to come in and get it. (Participant 3)

However, there was little evidence that the research participants were using formal monitoring systems or metrics to demonstrate the effectiveness of social media marketing or to guide their social media strategies. Participants' responses mainly suggested a more informal approach, in which the perceived importance of social media marketing in the current retail environment appeared to follow intuition or general observation rather than actual measurement of its impacts. The informal nature of social

media marketing activities was in line with the findings of previous literature, which highlighted the difficulties of measuring the success of social media marketing in the small business sector, especially the intangible, longer-term impacts (Miles, 2014). Participants did not generally mention the more formal indicators of the impacts of social media marketing, identified by Brooks and Simkin (2011) as financial measures (e.g., ROI), quantitative measures (e.g., market share), qualitative measures (e.g., brand awareness), and hybrid measures (e.g., brand equity). The exception was Participant 2, who explained, “My return investment probably has been over 500 percent.” However, the tone of this comment indicated that it was likely to involve a large element of guesswork rather than any specific evidence.

Although the participants were generally positive about the impacts of social media marketing on their businesses, therefore, the lack of robust evidence to support this may be undermining their ability to understand the full range of benefits and how to maximize them.

### **Use of Social Media Tools**

The case study participants were asked to discuss which social media tools they use the most, and why. Previous studies of the use of social media marketing by small businesses had revealed that the channel most commonly used for this purpose is Facebook, largely for reasons of low cost and the ability to reach a large audience (Nobre & Silva, 2014; Ratliff & Kunz, 2014). However, the social media landscape is constantly changing, with new tools evolving and become popular over time. It was therefore

important to get insights into which social media tools small business owners in the retail clothing industry are currently using.

One of the main findings to emerge from the study was that all three case study participants were using multiple social media tools. As noted above, one of the reasons for using multiple social media tools is the ease and convenience with which they can simultaneously distribute posts across a number of different platforms at low cost. There is also evidence from previous studies that using multiple social media enhances the benefits of social media marketing (Kourti, 2015). The responses of the case study participants help confirm this, revealing a strong focus on multiple social media channels and the belief that this approach is beneficial for business.

I use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat ... I set my social media where when I post something, I post to ALL of the social media sites. So, they all get the same amount of attention – Facebook, Instagram, Snap(chat), you know, it's across the board. (Participant 2)

I use Instagram. I use Facebook ... I use Twitter as well, but mainly Facebook and Instagram because they're more of a visual aspect and the customer can direct message me. (Participant 3)

The relatively widespread use of social media tools contrasts with Durkin et al.'s (2013) suggestion that small business owners are hesitant to adopt new marketing techniques. Within their broad usage of multiple social media tools, however, the participants indicated that they rely most heavily on the use of Facebook and Instagram in their social media marketing, mainly because of the importance in the retail clothing

industry of being able to convey visual images of their products to customers. They explained the ways in which they used photos to attract customers via these sites.

Anything that can display visual content. So that's Instagram, Facebook  
(Participant 3).

The better the picture, the better number of responses you get. (Participant 1)

I use models in my photos so that they can actually see how things fit on the human body ... I have one model that I use, mainly because she is—she's not plus size, she's not a tiny woman, she's curvy, and her shape shows my customers really how things look. (Participant 3)

The main differences between these two social media tools is that Instagram is perceived to be used more by younger people and Facebook by a broader demographic, a distinction which Participant 1 indicated is important in their choice of which tool to use for particular purposes.

Instagram to be honest is more of a younger person's social media. So if I'm going to be targeting ... say the 21 to the 35 year olds, then I will straight go to Instagram because most of those pieces show more skin, and more sexy apparel which get more feedback on Instagram ... If I'm targeting my business apparel women, church women, or just say maybe after five gowns or things like that, then I'll be more prone to put those things on Facebook because my people on Facebook have a different—they're looking for different pieces. (Participant 1)

Two of the participants described ways in which developments in the functionality of Instagram are making this tool increasingly useful to small business



owners. The specific features mentioned were the analytics that allow users to monitor usage of their site, and new options for small business owners to post advertisements on the site.

They show your insights now. So they show you how your followers, what time they're really drawn to your pictures, how many pictures you got looked at and liked at a certain time of day. So in that instance you know when you post next time what time of day you should post, what day of the week you should post ...

(Participant 3)

Instagram has just released to small businesses where we're able to sponsor an ad on Instagram, which was ... great because I always wondered how the major, bigger companies were able to do this on Instagram and it wasn't available for small businesses ... I mean, you can use the hashtags on there but it was nothing like them searching a market for you, gathering those people that might be interested in your product, already for you and you just paying. So, that was one of the main obstacles. But they have since offered sponsorship to small businesses. (Participant 2)

The research findings also indicated that the participants heavily use Facebook for marketing purposes. One of the main perceived benefits of this tool, they explained, is that it enables them to target specific demographic groups and even individual customers through the "tagging" function. However, although businesses can use business pages on Facebook for formal advertising purposes, one participant mentioned that this feature is

too expensive so she just uses the basic Facebook features to post photos of her latest stock.

I mainly use the aspect of just putting the pictures out there, and I try to rotate them every week, let people know when new stuff is coming in, when I'm having a sale, and it kind of generates customers to come in, especially if I tag them.

(Participant 3)

In contrast, it appears that YouTube is currently under-utilized by these small business owners, despite its potential for visual marketing. One of the participants indicated a strong awareness of the potential benefits of using YouTube videos for marketing purposes, and an expectation that she would make more use of this channel in future.

I do have a YouTube. I don't use it as much as I should because I found that a lot of people told me they get a lot of feedback from YouTube videos ... I'm finding that videos are most effective because you can post a picture, but if you can show ... the thing, image in motion, it seems to get a better response. So I'm trying to— not shy away from the cameras, start to use videos because I find the videos are starting to really get a lot of feedback. I posted two videos yesterday and I had two people come in today from those videos and purchase. (Participant 1)

Although Twitter was reportedly being used to an extent in the case study organizations, the participants expressed mixed views on its value. The mixed views about Twitter in contrast with the findings of previous research that small business owners heavily use Twitter for social media marketing (Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013; Kourti,

2015; Kumar & Sundaram, 2012). Although one participant noted that this is “a good tool to use” (Participant 3), another emphasized that it is not very effective unless used very frequently, which is often difficult for a small business owner to achieve.

I found that if you're not a person that tweets every day, it's not as effective. And

I'm not an everyday tweeting person so I stopped using Twitter. (Participant 1)

It seems likely that the lower importance given to Twitter in the social media marketing practices of the research participants may reflect the nature of their industry, because marketing of clothing requires a more visual approach, which this site does not provide. Similarly, just one of the interviewees (Participant 2) reported using blogs for social media marketing, by paying bloggers to write about her business. This finding contrasts with the findings of research by Barnes and Jacobsen (2013), who found that 61% of their small business respondents used blogging, but may indicate that blogs are less suited to marketing within the retail clothing sector.

### **Social Media Marketing Strategies**

Previous researchers (e.g., Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; Durkin et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2013; Taneja & Toombs, 2014) reported that many small business owners do not use formal social media marketing techniques and strategies but are more likely to adopt ad hoc approaches to the use of social media. One of the documented reasons was a lack of adequate knowledge among small business owners regarding about how to conduct social media marketing. In the present study, none of the three case study participants perceived that they took a strategic approach in their social media marketing activity, a finding that therefore aligns with that of previous researchers.

There's just no rhyme or reason to it. I mean, the main thing is to be consistent with it, build a following, and go from there. (Participant 2)

I don't really have a strategy ... it's basically just posting pictures and waiting for a response ... I found that just relaxing and just posting a picture here and there, and not overloading people with your things that you're selling works for me.

(Participant 1)

Despite this self-reported lack of a formal strategy in their use of social media marketing, the interview data did reveal that participants use various strategic approaches. For example, they use deliberate timing of social media posts to maximize exposure to potential customers, using different social media tools for age groups, or employing social media to target individual customers about products likely to be of interest to them.

I also have a mobile truck as well, a mobile boutique that I take around the City of Chicago. So, I post those things. If I'm going to be at a certain place, you know, in Chicago, I post that out like a week prior to me even going to that location because I want to reach as many people as possible. (Participant 2)

I kind of know my customers ... what they want. So if I think of somebody ... who's looking for summer stuff, or looking for the next season, or looking for accessories, I can tag that initial customer whether it is Facebook or Instagram.

That's probably why I use those two the most. (Participant 3)

All the case study participants also demonstrated a strategic approach in terms of their timing or frequency of posting on social media. They stressed the importance of

consistent and frequent use of social media to retain the interest and awareness of customers over time.

I do like to make sure that I'm posting at least once a day, at least once a day because you don't want people to forget that you're existing and it's very easy to forget you in social media, in the social media world. (Participant 1)

To be consistent is the key thing with social media ... I mean, you can't post a picture one day and not post anything for a couple of days and expect for people to still respond or be interested in what you have going on. (Participant 2)

I don't like to post ... all my arrivals the same day unless it's the weekend. I try to stretch them out over a couple of weeks. (Participant 3)

Despite differences in views on the optimal time for posting on social media, the participants did concur on the importance of considering this factor and identifying the most effective time to do so, based on their understanding of when customers are most likely to check the sites. One participant reported that she makes a particular effort to post early each morning, because early morning is the time that she believes her potential customers usually check social media, while another argued that posting visual images later in the day has proven more effective in her business.

Say for instance on Facebook, I mean, that's like—the No. 1 thing people do before they brush their teeth is look at Facebook in the morning, you know, at 6:00 in the morning ... So, I set a time (a reminder) at 6:00 a. m. I'm up. I'm posting on Facebook because this is what people are looking at. I want to be fresh in your face in the morning. (Participant 2)

There's a time of day that you really should post when you're trying to do some visual, and it's not the morning. It's not the morning at all. (Participant 3)

Another aspect of strategy relates to the ways in which participants define responsibilities for social media marketing activity. Participant 3 stressed that she prefers to do all this herself rather than delegating to staff.

I pretty much do all my own posting. I do all my own photo shoots ... I mainly do all of the posting because in social media I know it's going to represent my business and me. (Participant 3)

This statement reflects an awareness of the risks involved in social media marketing, relating for example to reputation and brand image, which other researchers have discussed (e.g., Harrigan, 2012; Tuten & Angermeier, 2013). Taking personal responsibility for social media marketing activity might be a positive, strategic response to the perceived risks, in contrast with the avoidance of social media among small business owners in a study by Harrigan et al. (2012).

I could also discern a strategic approach in the participants' reported methods of learning about specific social media tools. Obtaining adequate knowledge and understanding of these tools is essential if small business owners are to make informed decisions about which is most appropriate for marketing of their businesses, and how to use them. However, Harrigan et al. (2012) reported that small business owners in their study were more inclined to use familiar forms of online communication, such as e-mail, instead of learning about and utilizing new forms, such as social media sites.

In contrast, two of the three participants in the present study reported that they take proactive steps to learn about or conduct research into social media tools. These measures were mainly informal, such as spending time trying out the functions of the tools, asking contacts about their experiences of using them, but one also indicated that she has considered taking formal classes to learn more about social media tools. This participant described a process in which she first tries to learn about social media tools independently, and then seeks informal or more formal guidance if this proves necessary to increase her understanding. Overall, she stressed the importance of personal learning through direct experience of using the tools.

I have researched social media and I have read different free informational research packets on it ... I like to just dive in myself first of all to see how I can do on my own ... I did have to learn how to do Snapchat at first ... I didn't just jump in because I wasn't good at that so I had to have a friend of mine teach me that ... I would take a class on it if need be because there's a lot of things that are coming out right now that I'm thinking about taking a few classes on. But everything else I think I just need to hands-on, get in there and try to learn for myself. It's better for me that way. (Participant 1)

One of the other participants also reported that she finds out about the most effective social media marketing tools by asking others in the same industry about their experiences of them, rather than just relying on the promotional literature received from companies.

I do talk to my colleagues, other boutique owners that I know and ask, “Have they ever used it? Have they ever heard of it? Have they been recommended to it, or do they know someone who has used it? (Participant 3)

However, the remaining participant indicated that she mostly just asks her teenager for advice on how to use social media. Although her response suggested that she perceived this method to be effective, it is possible that this small business owner may not necessarily be focusing on or finding out about tools that are most suited to business marketing by taking this approach.

It’s contacting my teenager, in all honestly. They’re the most savvy, you know, with it. (Participant 2)

Overall, the research data indicates that the case study participants were demonstrating elements of a strategic approach to social media use, but that this fell short of a formal social media strategy. Although these small business owners had identified effective ways of using social media to achieve their short-term goals of attracting customers and making sales, there was no evidence that they were using social media to meet longer-term business goals in a strategic way. There was also little evidence that they were systematically monitoring the overall impacts of social media marketing on their business, despite the availability of analytical tools within social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, in the ways recommended by previous researchers (e.g., Barnes & Jacobsen, 2013).



## **Barriers and Limitations**

There was little evidence from the interviews that these small business owners had experienced insurmountable barriers to their use of social media marketing. This finding contrasts with the findings of previous studies, which have identified factors such as cost, lack of technology and business cultures to be barriers to the adoption of social media marketing among small businesses (Barnes & Jacobson, 2013; Cronin-Gilmore, 2012; O'Donnell, 2014). These previous studies reported that personal networking and word of mouth were often the focus of marketing among small businesses. In recognition of the importance of these, Harrigan et al. (2011) concluded that businesses should use online tools as a complement to, rather than a replacement for, traditional marketing and networking practices.

The current study provided support for this argument, with two of the participants stressing that although social media marketing is important and effective, it is not sufficient for reaching all potential customers, and there is still a need to use traditional marketing methods.

Social media is very important for marketing and getting the word out there, but it doesn't generate the sales that you need in order to stay in business. So you still have to do your door-to-door advertising. You still have to do your cards in different businesses. You still have to do ... the old way of marketing in order for it to work because social media is so large now that even if you're posting maybe 5000 pictures a week, that doesn't mean that it's reaching your audience. It's good, but then you can't just totally rely on that alone. (Participant 1)

Some older people are not on social media. They don't really know about it or they just don't like to change to it. (Participant 2)

To the extent that the interviewees mentioned barriers or difficulties in the use of social media for marketing purposes other than this limitation, these fell into the categories of cost, time, and lack of training.

Only one of the interviewees (Participant 3) specifically referred to cost and time constraints as difficulties encountered in her use of social media marketing. She stressed the need to allocate sufficient time for posting on social media at times of day when this has proven to be most effective, and highlighted the costs involved in using more advanced social media marketing features.

Anything negative would probably be on me, the human part where you have either set that time aside, or not having enough time, or posting – not posting at the right time. (Participant 3)

Now they're all costing when you want to reach outside your current target market space, like within a couple of miles. Once you go outside that, there's usually a small fee, but everything costs. (Participant 3)

Eid and El-Gohary (2013) found evidence that the allocation of sufficient resources to social media marketing is an important predictor of success. The concerns raised by Participant 3 about the cost of this activity may therefore be unfounded if it were possible to demonstrate the return on this investment, which again highlights the need for more formal monitoring and measurement in this area.

Participant 2, conversely, identified the lack of available training as a barrier to more effective use of social media marketing in her business. This finding is in line with the earlier findings of Cronin-Gilmore (2012) and Harrigan et al. (2012), who found that the lack of available technical training for small business owners to be a factor hindering the take up of social media marketing among this group.

I wish there was a better place to know that you can go where you can learn all of the techniques, especially about being a business owner, which means that when I say that – when you have a business, it's a little bit different when you're posting personal and when you're posting things for your business. So, I wish there was like a class or some type of tutorial for me to take, especially for some of the newer social media apps out here. (Participant 2)

Finally, Participant 1 described how she sometimes feels overwhelmed by the challenge of using social media, particularly when seeing her competitors' posts and becoming concerned about the impact on her own sales. She identified this as a potential problem that other small business owners in this sector may need to overcome.

Just trying not to get caught up in the other boutiques that are out there, the other stores that are out there, the other pictures that you see. If you—you may have a product that's coming in, and you seen it already at someone else's store on their pictures, just try not to get distracted by those types of things. And that's the only burden or problem with it. (Participant 1)

This statement provides support for the argument that business owners need more training and awareness about social media marketing to help reduce any feelings of

overwhelm and provide them with the knowledge and confidence to compete effectively in this arena.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

As highlighted in the review of literature, relatively little research has been conducted to date on the use of social media marketing among small business owners (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014), and no studies were identified that focused specifically on social media marketing in the small retail clothing industry. Based on the literature review, I concluded that researchers do not agree about which social media tools are the most effective for small businesses. By using qualitative case study research methods to investigate social media usage by the owners of small retail clothing stores in Chicago, this study helps to fill an important gap in the literature and to provide insights that are likely to be helpful to other small business owners.

Providing insights to small business owners about social media use is extremely important, because researchers have found that marketing strategy may account for up to half of all variation in the performance of small businesses across sectors (Blackburn et al., 2013). Additionally, a growing body of research has identified social media marketing as a critical success factor for small businesses (Hibbler-Britt & Sussan, 2015). Social media marketing is important to small business success largely because innovation in marketing is much more affordable for these businesses than product innovation or organizational innovation (Çetinkaya & Kalkan, 2014). In the past, it was essential to have a large budget for marketing purposes. Social media is effectively leveling the playing field by providing small business owners access to the same marketing tools used

by major corporations, at relatively low cost. It allows small firms to access widely dispersed populations of potential customers in ways that were not previously possible, and to compete within their sectors by engaging and communicating with individual customers online to build and manage their brands (Mitchell et al., 2013; Nobre & Silva, 2014).

Because of these developments, however, it has become critical for small businesses to adopt social media marketing if they are able to compete effectively in their sectors and survive. The lack of available training and information on effective social media marketing for small businesses makes it especially important to generate research-based evidence of effective practice in this area, as well as evidence of the perceived challenges and barriers encountered by small business owners and how small business owners can overcome the barriers. The current study helps contribute to this evidence base.

Overall, the research has confirmed that, based on the perceptions of the research participants, it has become essential for small businesses in this sector to utilize social media for marketing purposes. The interviewees stressed that social media use is proving to be beneficial for their respective businesses and an important and effective way of ensuring that potential customers are aware of their products. Social media marketing is especially important in the retail clothing industry, in which it is essential that customers are able to see visual images of the products, but is also likely to apply to many other types of small business, especially in the retail sector. Based on the participants reported experiences, the study has highlighted the need to utilize different social media tools for

different purposes, such as accessing particular age groups or keeping customers informed of special promotions. They have also demonstrated the importance of being consistent in the use of social media and posting frequently and at the times of day when customers are most likely to be online. Although the participants stressed that these measures are critical for the effectiveness of social media marketing, they may also present challenges to small business owners who are often juggling many responsibilities and may find it difficult to allocate the necessary time or resources to social media usage, when approached in an ad hoc way. I have therefore used the insights to develop evidence-based recommendations for a more strategic approach to social media marketing use among small business owners in the retail clothing industry.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Small businesses are the leading drivers of worldwide economic development (Eid & El-Gohary, 2013) and account for more than half of the United States' private sector workforce. Their failure can lead to unemployment and lost economic growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Effective marketing and marketing management can help prevent small business failure, thereby strengthening the economy (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). It has been reported that 90% of firms that use social media marketing report benefits from doing so (Bughin & Chui, 2013), and that social media usage accounts for 37% of sales among those who use it (Schaupp & Belanger, 2014). However, previous studies have found that small business owners often lack concrete strategies to learn about and implement new technologies (Durkin et al., 2013; Taneja & Toombs, 2014). This study therefore has implications for the success of the small business sector as well

as the U.S. economy, by generating evidence based guidance of effective practice in social media marketing in the small retail clothing industry, and the types of barriers and difficulties to be overcome.

The study also has potential implications for the strengthening of the business community, because readers in small business may feel encouraged to adopt social media marketing practices that help facilitate open communications between consumers and businesses. Previous researchers discussed social media marketing as a process by which businesses help to develop local communities and which contributes to the knowledge and trust shared among stakeholders in that community (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2014). By helping to promote more effective social media marketing activities based on the proven successful practice of these case study participants and their experiences of overcoming difficulties and barriers it is hoped that the study will help contribute to a more open, trusting business community, not just in Chicago but also in other business communities across the nation.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the research findings, I propose a few recommendations for action among small businesses and other stakeholders. Because I conducted the research only with small business owners in this sector, the recommendations mainly relate to this sector. However, it is likely that small business owners in other sectors, particularly other areas of retail, might also benefit from their implementation.

First, local business associations should consider sponsoring workshops or other training in social media marketing directed at the needs of small business owners,

particularly in the retail industry. Business associations should provide these at low cost or free of charge to these small business owners, with the ultimate objective of strengthening the local business economy and community. The training should focus not just on the use of particular social media tools, but on developing a social media marketing strategy and on monitoring the impact of this on the business.

Second, educational institutions or IT training providers should develop affordable and accessible social media marketing courses or materials targeted to the needs of small business owners, especially in the retail sector. Social media courses should include online training for self-learning purposes, to provide busy small business owners with the flexibility to complete the training at their own convenience.

Third, small business owners in the retail clothing and other sectors should implement a strategic approach to social media marketing, setting long-term as well as short-term goals and identifying and implementing the most appropriate social media tools and practices for the achievement of these.

Fourth, small business owners should also continually monitor and measure the outcomes and business impacts of their social media marketing activities, using a range of quantitative and qualitative performance indicators. These might include, for example, such number of inquiries and sales, but also evidence of brand awareness and reputation based on customer feedback. In the short term, business should use monitoring to determine the most effective times to post on social media, based on positive outcomes such as numbers of inquiries.



Fifth, within the retail clothing sector, small business owners should focus on those social media tools, which provide the most effective forms of visual marketing, particularly Facebook and Instagram, but also other channels growing in popularity such as Snapchat. Business owners might also consider YouTube for developing video-based marketing.

Sixth, business owners should conduct customer research to identify the social media tools used most frequently by the target customers of the business, including those in different socio-demographic groups. Based on the results, businesses should employ multiple social media tools to ensure that marketing activities reach all target customer groups.

Seventh, small business owners in the retail clothing and other sectors should be willing to invest time and resources into social media marketing training to ensure that they achieve the full benefits of this activity.

Finally, business owners should implement social media marketing as part of an overall marketing strategy, tailored to a small business's target market, which might also retain more traditional marketing activities such as printed advertisements.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

One of the main limitations of this study is that the results are not generalizable to small business settings other than the participants' enterprises, owing to the context-specific nature of case study research (Yin, 2013). However, the study has demonstrated that the case study methods employed were successful in yielding valuable insights into small business owners' use of social media marketing and their perceived barriers to

implementation. Although some of the findings are likely to be broadly applicable to small business owners in other sectors, others – such as the need for visual marketing – are more specific to this sector. It is therefore recommended that similar case study research should be conducted, using semistructured or in-depth interviews, with small business owners in other sectors so that recommendations can be developed which are tailored to the specific marketing requirements of different types of small businesses.

I also recommend that researchers carry out large-scale quantitative research into the social media marketing practices of small business owners in general. Quantitative data is essential to investigate the relationships between different social media marketing practices and business outcomes, and to provide a more robust evidence base on successful practice in this area. A quantitative survey conducted with a random sample of small businesses from across the United States, stratified on factors such as industry and size, could generate important insights. Alternatively, quantitative surveys of this type might be conducted in particular localities, such as Chicago, and the findings used to develop training courses and material for local small businesses.

### **Reflections**

Based on the literature review, I expected to find a relatively low level of usage of social media in the sector. Previous researchers (e.g., Clark & Calli, 2015) have resistance to the use of social media marketing among small business owners in general, and I had no reason to assume that this would be different for those in the retail clothing sector. As a result, the original intention was to focus on exploring the perceived barriers and challenges in social media marketing use. However, I discovered that the case study

participants all had relatively high levels of awareness of the benefits of social media marketing and were using this approach actively to promote their businesses and products. This discovery led to a slight change of emphasis in presentation of the findings, from an emphasis on barriers and how to overcome them to a focus on the perceived benefits of social media and the strategies and practices that participants used. I believe the findings are encouraging in terms of the potential positive impacts of social media marketing on the small retail clothing sector, and they have enabled me to develop recommendations that are based on perceived evidence of its benefits.

I believe that use of the TAM as a conceptual framework for this study was a successful approach. The TAM helped me to retain a focus on PU and PEOU (Ashraf et al., 2014) of social media marketing in the interviews and, in this way, ensure that they generated practical information that could be used to develop evidence-based recommendations of value to other small business owners.

When analyzing my research data, however, I recognized that I had missed some opportunities to probe participants in more detail and follow up their responses with further questions. Further probing would have enabled me to obtain an even more in-depth understanding of how and why they use social media in the ways they do. However, I hope that, by identifying areas for further exploration, the study has provided a useful foundation for future research.

It also became apparent that the three case study participants had relatively similar experiences of using social media and were using similar strategies and practices, with just minor differences in the use of specific practices or tools. Because I used purposive

sampling, it is not possible to tell whether this reflects the wider experiences of the owners of small retail clothing stores in Chicago (or other locations) or whether the similarities resulted from any bias in the sampling procedure, which led me to identify and select these case study participants. Although the initial stage of the sampling procedure used random methods, with 20 small retailers being selected randomly from business directories relating to Chicago, the second stage involved seeking evidence of social media usage for the selected companies online, and inviting those with a social media presence to volunteer to take part in the study. Small business owners with particular approaches to social media may have been more likely than others to volunteer to participate.

I believe that these potential limitations or sources of bias in the study do not undermine the relevance and value of the findings. The purpose of the research was not to generate results that are representative of all small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, but to provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of the owners of a small number of case study organizations, which have been used to develop evidence-based recommendations for other small business owners in this sector.

### **Conclusion**

Adopting social media marketing may enable small businesses to remain competitive, adding to the stability of small businesses as a significant source of jobs and economic growth (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Conversely, neglecting the use of social media in their marketing strategies has become a major business risk for small firms, now that consumers are likely to look online when considering product or service purchases.

Despite this risk, little previous research exists with the objective of developing practical guidance to help small business owners successfully adopt social media marketing.

This qualitative case study research with small business owners in the retail clothing industry in Chicago makes a significant contribution toward filling this information gap. The study also demonstrates the effectiveness of case study research in generating valuable insights and information for use in developing practical recommendations for small business owners and other relevant stakeholders. I hope that the recommendations for practical action and for future research will be adopted, with resulting benefits for Chicago's small retail clothing sector, the local business community, small businesses in general and ultimately the U.S. economy.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### Pre-Interview Script

Before the interview commences, state the following:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

The purpose of my research is to determine what barriers you and other owners of small retail clothing businesses in Chicago, Illinois must overcome in order to be competitive.

There are no financial or other incentives for participation in this study.

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, including after this interview, without negative consequences.

Feel free to contact me by phone if you wish to withdraw from participation after the interview takes place. I will provide you with my contact information at the end of the interview.

Feel free to decline to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Do you consent to me audio-recording the interview?

### Interview Questions

1. How many years has your company been in business?
2. How do you determine the types of marketing tools that are most effective for you? (Prompt: educated guess? do you calculate formal ROI?)
3. Turning to social media, which include blogs, accounts like Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn, please describe what types of social media your company uses?
4. How and when did you decide to use social media for your company? (Prompt: What was your development process? Do you have any formal or informal policies about social media?)

5. What aspects of social media, in general, do you find most useful for your business?
6. What obstacles or difficulties do you encounter in using social media in your business in general?
7. Do you use social media for marketing purposes? Why or why not? (Probe: For what specific marketing activities do you use social media? On which sites?)
8. If you were interested in learning more about a new social media tool or technique, what steps would you take to gain that information?
9. What additional information can you share regarding your use of social media for the purpose of this study?

## Appendix B: Invitation Letter

[Date]

Dear [Prospective Participant's Name],

My name is Irene Abrons, and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study entitled "Social Media Marketing Among Small Retail Clothing Businesses". In this study, I am interested in understanding what barriers prevent small retail clothing businesses from using social media marketing effectively.

I would like to invite you, as the owner of [Business Name], to participate in the study. Your participation would be greatly appreciated. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview at a public location, such as a library conference room, to discuss social media marketing. You will also be asked to help by providing documentation regarding your business' social media marketing efforts, so that I can better understand how businesses are currently using social media marketing.

Participation in the study is voluntary, and all information you share as a part of the study will be kept completely confidential. The results of the study could provide useful information for you to consider in your own social media marketing efforts. The results could also enable researchers, business people, and policymakers to take steps to help small businesses succeed.

### Next Steps

If you are interested in participating, I would like to provide you with more information about the study and request that you sign a form consenting to participate. After you have provided your consent, we will schedule the interview.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience at XXX-XXX-XXXX and/or XXX@XXX if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions or concerns. If you would like to privately discuss this study with a Walden University representative, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you,

Irene Abrons