



# Development Strategies for Privately Owned Fashion Boutiques in southeast United States

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### ABSTRACT

In the fashion business, privately owned brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques in the United States face the challenge of competing with online retailers who usually have low overheads and inventories. The knowledge and awareness of the changing marketing landscapes responsible for the decline in the survival rate of traditional or brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques may be essential to traditional and online entrepreneurs, to increase adaptability and business sustainability. Grounded in the general systems theory, the research conducted through the invocation of a qualitative multiple case study, entailed the exploration of strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners in contending with the online retailers. Interviews constituted the means for data collection and involved 5 brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owner participants, who operated retail fashion businesses in the southeast region of the United States. The successful existence of the business for more than 5 years, while participation criteria in the study, also indicated merit in studying success in traditional fashion retailing. The primary data from interviews were analyzed and triangulated with credible secondary sources such as information and reports from the U. S. Small Business Administration, U. S. Census Bureau, and fashion industry sources. From a thematic analysis of the interview data, the three themes that emerged from the data analysis were the importance of business success of marketing strategies, cognizance of fashion trends, and the role of customer preference in economic success. The potential knowledge from the utilization of the study results may serve to increase the success rates of traditional and online fashion startups and possibly endow these businesses with the adaptabilities and strategies capabilities in the inevitable greater transformation to an online business world.

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### Introduction

Traditional small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in retail face the threat of obsolescence and closure, with the exponential growth of online retailers. Chiou, Chou, and Shen (2017) emphasized that convenience plays a major role in shopping decisions, which may account for the increase in shopping over the Internet, often to the disadvantage of a traditional brick-and-mortar store. The online fashion retail market is a significant emerging trend, which threatens the survivability of pure brick-and-mortar fashion stores, who are not fully committed to embracing online selling. Luo and Sun (2016) suggested, that with online retailing, brick-and-mortar retailers, small business retailers could face new opportunities and challenges. Li, Jiang, and Wu (2014) however observed that building customer trust is critical for online fashion retailers, perhaps more so than in traditional stores and boutiques, as there is a higher risk when purchasing over the Internet, in the absence of the face-to-face transaction. The current sparse knowledge and information on Internet fashion retailing presents challenges and opportunities to explore and understand how business leaders in the traditional fashion boutique industry can develop strategies to offset the threat of online retailers, or perhaps implement hybrid strategies, which reflects a judicious synthesis of the two different approaches, which however revolve around the commonality of a customer-centric focus. The seeming current paucity in

knowledge predicated the purpose and rationale of this research study, where the aim was to study the strategic imperatives for traditional fashion retailers to contend with the reality of Internet fashion retailing.

Several entrepreneurs provide services in a specified geographical location to consumers. The state of South Carolina in the United States in 2011 had 71,201 small firms in the retail trade business (SBA, 2014). SME owners have been instrumental in contributing to job creation and poverty allocation in the state. Many businesses have reinvented themselves, as a free enterprise has changed, and business owners have implemented strategies to remain profitable, sustainable, and competitive with the change in the operating landscape transformed with the Internet and technology. Oguonu (2015) opined that effective entrepreneurship demands the decision-making functions of preparation, establishing, guiding, and supervising are essential to staying afloat and successful. The focus of small businesses must be to remain sustainable and retain consumers; therefore, firms could be adaptive and fluid to be customer responsive and keep clients happy. Entrepreneurship involves risk-taking and multifaceted strategies activities (Baker, 2015). Many entrepreneurs are successful and sustainable in efforts to earn profitability beyond the first critical 5-year period when many are susceptible to failure and most are vulnerable. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore

the strategies that traditional fashion boutique owners use to survive in an environment of online retailing. The motivation to purchase online Shanthi and Kannaiah (2015) reasoned, is primarily for the convenience and unrestricted access in terms of geography and time. The disadvantage of the traditional brick-and-mortar stores is in the fixed hours, as opposed to the ability of online retailers to operate on a 24/7 basis.

#### **Problem Identification**

Many traditional brick-and-mortar fashion industry has failed to offer customers online purchase options and counter the lowered customer traffic arising from online retailing (Li, Lu, & Talebian, 2015). Statistics indicate that an estimated 40% of Americans shop online weekly and monthly, with different frequencies, and online sales have continued to increase, from \$287 billion in 2014 to a projected \$523 billion in 2020 (Kundu, 2018). The outcomes in the consequences of the online shopping trend have manifested in traditional retail store closures of 278 million square feet in the southeast United States between 2015 and 2016 (Cavan, 2016). The specific business problem is the alarmingly high failure rate of many traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutique retailers in innovatively developing and implementing adaptive marketing strategies in an environment of an exponential increase in online retailing.

#### **Purpose of Research**

The purpose of the qualitative multiple case study undertaken was to explore the business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to innovatively develop and implement adaptive marketing strategies in the environment of 2019, which saw an exponential increase in online retailing. The case study population for this study, was small business owners and managers of traditional privately owned fashion boutiques, with a record of success, demonstrating retail business profitably for at least 5 years, in the geographic region of the southeast United States. From the population, a purposive sample included five fashion boutique owners who presented strategies to not succumb to online retailing. The emergence and knowledge from this study could serve to advance the business awareness of the necessity for adaptive and innovative marketing by fashion boutique business in the southeast United States and may be of interest to other entrepreneurs as well in fashion retailing.

#### **The Rationale for Qualitative Research**

The research methodology after careful consideration prompted undertaking a qualitative study. Yin (2017) noted that qualitative studies are suitable for gathering context-intensive and rich data through direct contact with participants in their natural environments. Murshed and Zhang (2016) suggested that a quantitative approach is numerically oriented, requires precise measurements of constructs, and often involves statistical analyses to test prespecified hypotheses, however, is inadequate to gain insight into firsthand experiences, and therefore a qualitative study seemed better suited to fulfill the research objectives of this study on fashion retailing. The complexities in time, costs, and in analyzing different types of data, represented some limitations and infeasibility (Tunarosa & Glynn, 2017).

This qualitative study involved the concomitant invocation of a multiple case study design, as the aim was to study fashion retailers and peruse other sources of credible information, with the triangulation of data to achieve holistic analysis. Research practitioners have noted that a case study design is appropriate to use in undertaking a study, given the

flexibility in achieving comprehensive outcomes to fulfill the desired objectives (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

#### **Research Question**

The overarching research question for this study was: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to contend with the trend of online retailing?

#### **Theoretical Underpinning**

The general systems theory (GST) advanced by Bertalanffy (1968) served as the underlying theoretical lens and constituted the conceptual framework and underpinning for this study. Bertalanffy stated that the GST may explain some special systems and decision theory. The postulations of the GST provided additional reinforcement to the data analysis and interpretations of the primary data, and the further triangulation with other sources of credible and pertinent information and data. Business owners could use the GST as a valuable point of reference because the overall operation of a business is a combination of different facets of the organization, as represented by—the functions of logistics, marketing, and research and development. The different functions must seamlessly perform cohesively,—collaboratively, adaptively, and synergistically. The GST served in this study gaining a deeper understanding of challenges traditional retailers face in keeping pace with customer choice behavioral propensities for convenience.

Mania-Singer (2017) found value in using the GST, by applying its principles to formulate feedback mechanisms in enhancing the performance of the different components of the business system larger system overall. The fundamental premises of this theory, notably—adaptability and decision optimization, provided the theoretical perspective and—underpinned this study. The invocation of relevant theoretical postulations helped gain a deeper understanding of the study findings, in using the lenses of these perspectives.

#### **Potential Study Significance**

The findings from this study may be of significance to traditional fashion boutique owners in efforts to implement strategies to counter online retailing and thereby increase profitability and sustainability. The study may serve in increasing the knowledge and ability of fashion businesses and employees and contribute to profitability, job creation, and in some way, even in potentially improving the standard of living of communities in the southeast United States. The study findings could be of significance therefore too small business owners by possibly yielding strategies privately owned fashion boutique owners in the southeast United States implement to ensure business sustainability.

#### **Professional and Academic Literature Review**

The overarching question for the study was: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to negate online retailers? The purpose of a professional and academic literature review presented herein is to summarize, compare, and contrast numerous quality academic and practitioner studies and viewpoints aligned to the research topic. Hosseini, Chileshe, Zuo, and Baroudi (2015) noted that integrative literature reviews often offer an effective method of conducting rigorous studies in academia. What can be deducted from this view, is, this critique and analysis of literature is helpful to the researchers in acquiring in-depth knowledge and was true for this study as well. Quality and insightful literature reviews can provide a breadth of knowledge for a researcher to show the depth of the research. The databases used to locate peer-reviewed full-text articles published since 2015, for this study included ProQuest, Emerald Management Journals, ScienceDirect,

Sage Premier, Business Source Complete, Google Scholar, and government databases.

### General Systems Theory (GST)

As stated, the general systems theory provides the theoretical component of the study, the GST, developed by Bertalanffy in 1968, served as the conceptual framework for this study. The knowledge in the astute application of the principles and postulations of the GST could help small business owners acquire a deeper and more beneficial understanding of how a company operates like a system, perhaps valuable in formulating and implementing suitable strategies for growth and sustainability. Simola (2018) noted that the presence of exclusive components in various living and non-living systems could have an impact on other interactions with other systems. Systems have numerous parts and may become complex when interacting with one another (Rousseau, 2017). Small business owners could derive benefit in using the GST as a valuable point of reference because the overall operation of a business is a combination of different functions, notably—logistics, marketing, and research and development—working together collaboratively and synergistically. Teece (2018) stated that when components collaborate with other elements in a system, tangible and intangible products and services are produced in a repetitive cycle. Thus, firms could benefit when systems are working together cohesively, which is espoused in the GST model. The theoretical lenses of the GST and other theoretical suppositions help in a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. A theoretical lens also aided in a deeper understanding, under the analysis of collected data from interviews with fashion boutique owners and the strategies gleaned from their insights and perspectives.

Small business owners have various innovations that are often appealing to implement; however, entrepreneurs sometimes fail to understand the complexities of working in isolation and the collection of different systems within an organization or business enterprise. The understanding of the organizational systems within the enterprise may aid collaboration, innovation, and adaptation to external and internal factors, upon which the organization draws its ability to interact within pursuing economic viability and sustainability. Small business owners may overcome complexity in an organization by implementing collaborative strategies. The GST postulations have indicated that complex adaptive and balancing mechanisms may aid an organization in negotiating the challenges imposed by internal and external environments (Wang, Han, & Yang, 2015). Entrepreneurs could alleviate disadvantages in cohesion from the power of different elements, unified to the common organizational good. Open systems may simplify complex processes in business operations through adaptiveness and agility (Sweetman & Conboy, 2018). Entrepreneurs could simplify complex systems by implementing appropriate adaptive strategies in the organization and enhance the competencies for survivability in an uncertain environment beset by constant change. Using the lens of the systems theory, this adaptability was explored in discerning strategies traditional retailers have used to contend with Internet fashion retailing. Small businesses may have to constantly live the cycle of improvement continuously to help the enterprise remain sustainable. Ceric (2015) posited that a system is created in a business and its continuance is often determined by deliberate and developed strategies aimed at building and maintaining harmonious relations with other systems within the organization.

Businesses often operate in a repetitive cycle of activities, to produce products or services for consumers. The strategic organizational management approach of breaking down tasks into smaller functions and endeavors appears logical as complex systems are often problematic to comprehend, anticipate, and simulate. Adaptation and simulation sometimes aid in formulating strategies to render complex systems less debilitating (Bekebrede, Lo, & Lukosch, 2015). Small business owners, who contribute may encounter a complex system and could find alternative ways to lessen the problems and return to normalcy. Success in the face of complex systems and unfavorable situations may find benefit in adaptation, which invariably involves collaborative partnerships within the firm, rather than individuals and functions acting in silos and isolation (Pype, Mertens, Helewaut, & Krystallidou, 2018). The GST formally presented by Bertalanffy (1968), initially was proposed in the context of biology and explained as the optimal organizational functioning, which is contingent on the efficient working relationship of the different parts to the entire body and coordination function, cited in the context of vertebrate and intelligent biological entities (Ravenek, Skarakis-Doyle, Spaulding, Jenkins, & Doyle, 2013). The biological synergies of different system nevertheless have relevance to business as well, for after all organizations are social groups, functioning in furthering common interests, to deliver successful and favorable business outcomes, which are considered akin to living creatures. Consumers have some control over the development of new and existing products, and a business that considers consumer inputs, is likely to achieve greater success than when a customer wants, needs, and wishes are inadequately foreseen. The GST could contribute to organizational success, notably when individuals acquire a good understanding of how a system must operate in a repetitious cycle of continuity, in the face of constant change imposed by the constantly shifting business environment.

Zabeen et al. (2015) observed that a detailed examination of organizational developments when used to expand business performance, is often necessary and conducive to implementing change management and earning the buy-in of individuals and groups within the enterprise. Bertalanffy originally presented the GST which possibly paved the way for future scholar-practitioners to apply it to various business projects and other settings. The GST was relevant and found significant to the study in furthering the understanding of business and strategic imperatives, notably, valid for small business owners in the fashion boutique industry and heading operations of significantly small size; rather than larger corporations, where there are various departments. The postulations of the GST may offer simple, yet pertinent concepts that aid in understanding the strategic essentials and imperatives of organizational functioning (Alter, 2015), and were the reason for selecting it to underpin this study.

### The Living Systems Theory

Járos (2000) noted that the living systems theory, considered to be a subcategory of the GST in regards to the universe as an *actual* system often composed of the ordered levels of different kinds of smaller structures. Small business owners which perform optimally, usually conduct various tasks to endeavor to achieve sustainability, in which each organizational task is often executed in conjunction with one another and comprises the synchronization of different parts to complete a system. Per the connotations of this theory, living systems are often self-organizing, multifaceted open

systems that preserve themselves and interact with one another, within, and potentially harmoniously with the external environment (Swanson, 2005). In theory and practice, larger firms usually have different departments to handle different functions. Small businesses in contrast must display the resourcefulness and adaptability to handle all challenges that may arise within the company. The living systems theory when used in a study conducted by Skyttner (1997), where the main value lay in the creation of knowledge and the understanding of the overall system, led to a deeper understanding of the imperative necessity for enhancing and optimization of the critical factors influencing system efficiency. Living systems are closed systems that need special attention (Villalobos & Ward, 2015), where different operations in a business may need careful handling to complete the task. The inferences derived, is that business owners, one must adapt to the environment around and be able to operate strategically to remain sustainable in a continuous, evolving business world. Living systems often can derive energy from the surrounding environment (Elaiw, Alghamdi, & Bellomo, 2017), and the symbiotic association of the relationship between internal and external entities often helps in overcoming the challenges encountered in contending with the challenges in thriving and survivability. The principle of the living organization thus applies to businesses, in that the endeavor must be constantly adapt and survive in a competitively charged marketplace. Small business owners could benefit from the adaptation of the propositions of the living systems theory because operating a company requires energy and a commercial entity must maintain a systematic flow in a synergy of internal and external functioning, critical in the adaptation needed to flourish. The same principles of the theory thus hold for businesses, as leaders and owners of for-profit entities must understand that different operations within the company require energy to produce products for consumers.

Living systems are often composed of out-of-equilibrium thermodynamic objects that must work in conjunction with one another, suggestive of a repetitive cycle, with the different parts and components working synergistically in a system (Chatterjee, Georgiev, & Iannacchione, 2017). Ham (2015) suggested that to successfully progress over time, living systems should be sustained by flows of matter, energy, and information, which is true of the optimal functioning of the business as well. The understanding from the work of Ham and others is that day-to-day operations conducted by business owners require energy, matter, and information to remain sustainable and compete with other small businesses within the sphere of current and aspired locations in geography and time.

#### **Small Businesses**

Small business owners usually provide services or products in a specific geographical location. Small businesses also create jobs and contribute to the local community (Woods, Olson, Stark, & Stotler, 2018). Each country may have a different number of requirements to be considered a small business. Small business owners and psychological ownership are used often interchangeable because the company invariably belongs to the owner. Psychological ownership is the state where an individual may feel strong bonds of affiliation to the business (Chatterjee & Shukla, 2018), although while legal ownership is vested with the organization. The worldwide increase of local and international mergers and acquisitions (M&A), both within similar industries and through the implementation of multi-

industry modification policies, has put many businesses to fight with logistic individuality (De Bernardis & Giustiniano, 2015). When the merger and acquisition occur, the two entities involved may change the business name and operate under one firm.

De Sousa, Porto, Marcantonio, Takenouchi, and Yu (2015) identified four main factors influencing the decision-making process in business functioning, in respect of strategic actions to address problems, met goals, and objectives, and adapt to current and emergent situations and consequences. Researchers have shown that when companies invest in research and development, the economy could grow within that region (Tsvakirai, Liebenberg, & Kirsten, 2018). In the business, management could utilize alternatives to market and remain competitive on a small business scale.

#### **Business Strategies**

Knowledge management and the inter-organizational model is often favored by business practitioners and strategists and comprises of four innovative performance essentials: systematic innovation, innovation process management, resource integration, and marketplace performance (Tsai, 2016) that business owners could use during the innovation phase of a product. Change management is very important for business development, especially in the early stages of business growth and development (Pucher, Candel, Boot, Raak, & Vries, 2015). Collaboration helps organizations implement new ideas and innovate product development, to provide varied offerings to consumers. Outsourcing is perceived as an approach of a business that enables superior optimization of resources, economic acuity, and passing on some gains to the customer, which often translates into financial benefits for the business (Prystupa & Rzdca, 2015). Strategic sourcing has appeared to also serve as a vital enabler in the international supply chain, arguably with some risk minimization, arising in part from the diversity of a supply chain and the role economics plays in business sustainability (Kotula, Ho, Dey, & Lee, 2015). Companies in the fashion industry should innovate with business strategies to contend with rivals in an emerging global market.

When operating on a global scale, companies must adapt and develop their own "best practices" to remain competitive and sustainable in a hypercompetitive marketplace. Pandey and Rhee (2015), noted that effective CEOs use innovative ideas to manage change while displaying ethical conduct in the entire sphere of operations and influence. Implementing innovative and adaptive strategies arguably increases business success (Slávik & Zagoršek, 2016). Successful small business owners can reap advantages in partnering with other entrepreneurs and share information, to derive mutual synergies and benefits.

#### **Entrepreneurship**

Effective entrepreneurship often entails informed decision-making, as the aim is profitability while ensuring minimization of risks, often, achieved through diligence, preparation, and monitoring of internal and external environments and other prudent measures to insulate against adverse organizational interests (Ogonu, 2015). Entrepreneurs must be willing to take prudent and ethically sound risks, especially when increasing outreach to consumers. When new opportunities arise for small business owners, some use new ventures to fuel progress. Business owners should have a strategic plan in place to help alleviate transformational failure, and management may have to revamp the strategic blueprint. Duke (2018), recommended

cognizance of the five competitive forces in strategy formulation and execution, to include the challenges and threats posed by new entrants, substitute products, buyers, suppliers, and direct competitors. Passion is considered vital in thinking and acting strategically, ethically, and innovatively in preventing supply chain disruptions and scarcities from being a debilitating factor, as often impedes business success (Stroe, Wincent, & Parida, 2018). Businesspeople of all ages and years of experience must make sound decisions (Blewitt, Blewitt, & Ryan, 2018), and ensure that products and service offerings are delivered with integrity and upright ethical conduct at all times to consumers. Firstly, in business entrepreneurship, arguably, one must exercise the right of free will, which is best when also with there is the underlying critical and informed decision making. Entrepreneurial behavior often consists of a premeditated, intentional commitment, sometimes which may put oneself at risk for the sake of some personally inspired purpose. Secondly, entrepreneurial risk must be motivated by a desire to deliver benefits to others, not merely to oneself. Entrepreneurial business managers and owners must have various resources at their disposal to help facilitate sustainability in an emerging business world. Entrepreneurship can be a transformational opportunity with the informed and judicious business engagement (Gaddefors & Anderson, 2017) and business owners must be cognizant of current and impending change as an accepted facet of reality during the life and tenure of the business, and the adaptability is often a key differentiating factor of successful enterprises.

#### **Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises**

Neagu (2016) noted that only 10% of SMEs endure 5 years or more in the market. A reason that some SMEs fail is that the use of outsourcing products to other vendors. There are risks involved with outsourcing that managers must understand to increase sustainability. When there is a disruption in the supply chain, products become limited in availability to consumers and other businesses. Mwangola (2018) posited that organizations could derive supply chain flexibility by purchasing through funds from various systems and should always consider prudent options and alternatives. Small business owners should understand there may be times when interruptions in the supply chain may be unexpected, fixing the problem helps the supply chain to prosper and stay relevant in a competitive market. Effective execution of knowledge management often results in making successful strategic business choices and decisions (Adam, Mahadi, & Rahman, 2018). The government implements certain regulations on businesses to make sure each entity is operating safely and productively. Globalization has had a huge impact on small business owners. Business owners must revamp the company's strategic plan to become successful on the international level and compete with other small business owners. SMEs in the United States are the backbone of the economy, which some suggest, may account for the contributions of over 99% of all businesses (Elbeltagi, Hamad, Moizer, & Abou-Shook, 2016). SME owners must have the support of the community to be able to flourish and provide products to communities. When small business owners decide to move operations on an international scale, one must be willing to adopt strategies to help the company compete with the major companies and have solutions in place to surpass the competition. Hsieh and Chou (2018) suggested that as SMEs engage in international operations, when feasible, originality and creativity could advance

innovative and tactical thinking to be successful in such ventures.

#### **Small Business Networking**

In a globalized and networked world, business investors and stakeholders are usually well informed and often perform research on a company thoroughly over the Internet (Desai, 2018) to guide decisions. From an attractive investment standpoint, business owners could attempt to also seek angel investors, instead of family or friends to help expand the firm. The interests of investors may be well served in conducting due diligence in financing businesses (Huang, 2018). The study findings of Huang are pertinent to aspiring businesses and novice and seasoned investors, including their collaboration and networking with firms. Another form of networking for entrepreneurs is advertising. Luca, Hibbert, and McDonald (2015) lamented the trend in the drifting away of social marketing from traditional forms of customer relationship building, and recommend a blend of old and new approaches. Small business owners may have to adapt when networking with other companies, the implementation of strategic planning, to reap the benefits of competitive advantage. Another practice for small business networking is outsourcing products to other companies. Outsourcing has been a trend with large organizations, which firms, with a designated development team often handles the tasks of managing the process. A strategic alliance also often provides risk mitigation, benefits in economies of scale, and a large customer base, and is recommended for small businesses (Kim, 2015). Networking plays a vital role in businesses to remain sustainable in an ever-changing market. Sharafizad and Coetzer (2016) suggested four important mechanisms for networks among SMEs to pay attention to notable actors within the market, individuals' relationships inside the market, flow between individuals and within the market, and interaction between people within the market. Networking is a valuable tool that some business owners could utilize at one's disposal to remain sustainable. Networking will likely increase the opportunities for businesses in advancing success (Phillips, 2017).

#### **Online Retailing**

Online retailers have fewer overheads in retail space and possibly fewer inventory costs, which brick-and-mortar shops must factor into costs and profitability plans (Aydinliyim, Pangburn, & Rabinovich, 2017). Some brick-and-mortar small business owners do not have an e-commerce website for consumers to purchase products, which may harm business profits within the market. Li, Lu, and Talebian (2015) suggested that online retailers and traditional retailers may implement very dissimilar strategies in the wake of different operating models, predicated by economics and the costs of carrying inventories. Crews (2015) found and advised business leaders on three core ways to conduct ethnographic expectancy: incasting, forecasting, and co-evolution. Trends may help companies remain competitive on a domestic and international level. There are various applications at the disposal of consumers to make purchase transactions quickly from a cell phone, avoiding the delay in getting to a computer. Apps are continuing to emerge in the current competitive market of 2020. Online fashion retailers experience more returns than traditional stores since there is no physical store for customers to return items for refunds and damaged or defective merchandise (Difrancesco, Huchzermeier, & Schröder, 2018). Fashion boutiques or large retail stores must find alternatives to deplete inventory levels after trends become obsolete. Shao (2017) observed that

aligning with Forrester's forecasts and models helped several e-retailers to achieve 7.4% of all trade sales globally in 2015. Brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners may have to look at the current retail industry and find ways to help counter the threat of online retailers. Some traditional brick-and-mortar business forays into the e-commerce world to help revenue generation, on the other hand, some of the brick-and-mortar stores may have to close for good if failing to transition into online retailing. The absence of physical contact in the availability of merchandise for online customers is often a deterrent to purchase for some (Kerrebrock, Williams, & Bregman, 2017) since consumers only see images of merchandise until it is delivered. The frequency expressed problem about online retailing is that consumers will have to wait until the product is delivered to conduct a physical inspection; unlike in a brick-and-mortar store, where the product could be inspected in-person. Balan and Mathew (2016) noted that consumers make purchase decisions based on reviews and testimonials. The attitude and behavior of individuals when making an online purchase could help determine if the consumer will make a future purchase.

### **Technology**

Companies must be able to adopt technology within the organization to remain sustainable and be competitive with other firms. Once the importance of technology finds acceptance within SMEs, some employees may have to be trained to leverage it advantageously. Reich (2018) observed that information technology also includes any device that can be used in the dissemination of communication and information and influence individuals. Social media is another valuable tool that small business owners could use at one's disposal to get feedback from consumers. Some business owners utilize social media to market and receive feedback on products (Schlagwein & Hu, 2017), which could also aid in improving products and service quality. Entrepreneurs could benefit from the study findings because managers could use social media as a tool (i.e., surveys or feedback) on forecasting products to consumers. Omar (2015) argued that social networking involves fostering and augmenting relations between corporations and internal and external stakeholders and consumers. The integration of technology could help promote competitiveness within a firm when competing against other companies. Entrepreneurs should utilize the use of social media as an advantage to help stay sustainable with competing firms. Small business owners may profit from community engagement to aid business development (Piispanen & Paloniemi, 2015), when implemented may help managers surpass the first 5 years of inception. Some business owners neglect the fact of having up to date technology to help increase customer sales, and maybe a consideration for traditional fashion retailers. Small business owners that incorporate apps for consumers to use to purchase products have an upper leg on owners that continue to stick with the traditional way of conduct operations. Loyalty programs also play a significant role in building company-consumer relations and influence competitive advantage over competitors (Shulga & Tanford, 2018). Scott, Loonam, and Kumar (2017) noted that technology could facilitate business and customer relationships for the organization. Technology continues to play a critical role in the business world because companies could market, receive feedback from a product, and network with other organizations. The Internet has helped some small business owners remain profitable because e-commerce is changing

how firms operate for longevity, and different strategies must be sought and leveraged by traditional fashion retailers.

### **Gaps in Contemporary Business Knowledge**

Researchers have often failed to study how small business owners could find alternative ways for brick-and-mortar stores to emerge into the e-commerce world and remain sustainable in the face of the threat posed by online shopping environments. Major retail chains like Toys "R" Us and JC Penny are closing stores due to the disruptive trends of e-commerce, with Amazon and other leaders revolutionizing the online shopping phenomenon. Many traditional brick-and-mortar stores that have not adapted to customer trends have filed bankruptcy, which may indicate a failure to meet the demands of the online retailing world.

Bracketing is a technique that researchers often use to set aside preunderstanding and to act non-judgmentally in conducting unstructured qualitative interviews (Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Åstedt-Kurki, 2015). Developing an interview protocol was beneficial to conduct the interviews systematically and consistently throughout the study. Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) noted that an interview protocol can provide qualitative researchers with a means to undertake the study with a structured and consistent approach. The interview protocol provided uniformity in undertaking and completing semi-structured interviews of participants in this research study.

### **Participants**

The research strategy entailed using a purposive sample of five privately owned fashion boutique owners from the southeast United States, with interviews continuing to the point where no new data appeared forthcoming from the participants. The aim was to achieve saturation in data and thoroughness in data inquiry. Data saturation represents the stage where after conducting multiple interviews, subsequent participants, offer views already provided by preceding interviewees repetitive information from participants, and no new information emerging, is reflective of this level of comprehensiveness. It was observed, that after achieving data saturation, conducting further interviews yielded only repetitions in the data already collected and diminishing to no returns in new and quality data. The interviews included managers from different fashion boutique small businesses and a review of financial and other documents from these firms served as secondary data for a holistic multiple case study analysis.

The selection process for participants included privately owned fashion boutique owners, over the age of 21 and operating businesses in the southeast United States. The participant selection and eligibility criteria aligned with the research aims and reflected the overarching research question to achieve the objective of the study. We assigned each participant with a unique identifier to protect confidentiality throughout the study.

### **Research Method and Design**

The rationale for selecting a research method and design is to choose the most appropriate approach to answer the central research question (Hayes, Bonner, & Douglas, 2013; Yin, 2014). A qualitative method and a case study design was deemed appropriate for this research. Vohra (2014) noted that case studies combine a variety of data collection methods, such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and archives. For this research study, we used a qualitative research method. Using a qualitative methodology, as noted by Kimball and Turner (2018), can aid in analyzing data and developing suitable conclusions with the appropriate

invocation of the theoretical underpinning, as denoted in the conceptual framework. The study entailed the use of an exploratory, multiple case study design. Case studies often involve combining a variety of data collection methods such as interviews, questionnaires, observation, and archives (Vohra, 2014). Qualitative research does not require a set number of participants but rather represents the achievement of sufficiency and saturation.

#### **Population and Sampling**

Padykula (2016) noted that purposeful sampling is intended to facilitate the option and choice by the researcher to exercise individual judgment in intentionally selecting participants willing to provide information relevant to the research questions. The adequacy of sample size can help facilitate data saturation in a multiple case study. Data collection in this research study consisted of primary research in the form of participant interviews, while secondary data for data triangulation was sourced and derived from a combination of company financial records and information and other documents and data depicting, the profitability and performance of the businesses. The sample size of five case units, with comprehensive interviewing and using methodological triangulation, also aided in reaching data saturation. The interviews took place at the participants' office or place within the business in an area or location that was free from distractions.

#### **Ethical Research**

The study continued with data collection and safeguards and measures were put in place to prevent any possible ethical concerns and incidents, during the duration of the research. Yalcintas and Selcuk (2016) stated that research ethics is about virtuous intellectuals and researchers who try to behave responsibly to the members of the community of scholar-practitioners. The written recordings of observations of the participants supplemented the recording of data collected in this study, which yielded valuable information on business success and sustainability. The participants were informed that there are no incentives for participating in the study. The participants who met the inclusionary criteria for participating in this study received an informed consent form, personally delivered and the intent of the study was fully explained. After the acknowledgment of the consent forms, the interviewees were contacted in person or by telephone to discuss the time and dates of suitability to partake in the semistructured interviews.

#### **Data Collection Instruments**

Yin (2014) noted that qualitative researchers could conduct a case study from any of the six sources: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) direct observation, (d) interviews, (e) participants' observation, and (f) physical artifacts. There were one-on-one semistructured interviews conducted with five southeast United States privately owned fashion boutique owners to explore business strategies implemented in addressing the threat of online retailing in the fashion industry, to purely traditional and other such retailers. A case study served to focus on the topic and may have also aided in enhancing reliability within the research. The case study protocol consisted of an overview of the study project, data collection, data collection question, and guide for the study report (Yin, 2014). After the completion of the interviews, the use of member checking assured the precision of interview recordings. West (2015) stated that member checking is performed by returning the transcripts to the subjects to ensure that the script accurately captured each comment and corresponding feelings about each question.

Multiple data sources are suggested to be used rather than only one source to capture the contextual complexity of the phenomenon under exploration (Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011) and the case study imperatives were adhered to in this study.

#### **Data Collection Technique**

The most appropriate research approach that was used to answer the research question was a qualitative exploratory, multiple case study. Yu, Abdullah, and Saat (2014) noted that case study research contributes significantly to the in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, within the unique context of the study. Another approach used in the study was methodological triangulation. The use of archival documents and observations of the participants was considered secondary sources of data triangulation. A transcript review is a process where the participants are provided verbatim transcripts after the conclusion of the interviews to clarify, verify the accuracy, and correct any mistakes during the transcribing (Hagens, Dobrow, & Chafe, 2009), and as stated, was followed in this study. For this study, a Sony® ICDBX140 digital recorder was used to record interviews, after obtaining permission from the study participants. Transcribing the interview from the recording of each participant into a Microsoft Word document. During the duration of the interviews, we took notes of observations, thoughts, facial expressions, and body language. When conducting research, researchers often use a technique called member checking to help to validate participant information, so that there was a verification of the accuracy in the information, which also offered an opportunity for a participant to amend or add additional data and insight to the phenomenon.

#### **Data Organization Technique**

The inference drawn from the views of Berazneva (2014) is that audio transcripts could help aid in collecting data, in which the researcher can review the recorded interviews. The use of a reflective journal was beneficial to take notes throughout the interviews and note down important comments, in addition to the audio recording.

#### **Data Analysis**

Mayer (2015), stated that data triangulation is the use of more than one approach to the research question to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings. Alsaawi (2014) noted that qualitative interviews give the interviewee the chance to elaborate and explain specific issues, where necessary, through the invocation of open-ended questions. After the completion of reviewing each interview, participants had the option to verify the transcript review, with the opportunity provided to participants, to verify these, and this specific measure possibly served to enhance the reliability and validity of the results. Member checking was developed in qualitative research as a way of assessing validity (Madill & Sullivan, 2017). After the completion of the accuracy of the participants' data, the process of data assembly and analysis involved the use of NVivo® 12 software. Jacobs, et al. (2016) noted that clean data enables accurate analysis. . Also, each participant was given identity numbers along with a letter p such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and so forth. Coding is the process of putting together extracts (across documents) that are related to each other into basins called nodes (Zamawe, 2015).

#### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is not typically analogous and germane to qualitative studies because the tests and measures used to establish the validity and reliability of quantitative research



cannot be applied to qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015). All participants were asked the same open-ended interview questions, made possible by adhering to the interview protocol. Achieved and enhanced reliability necessitated incorporating various strategies, such as methodical triangulation, member checking, constant participation, and response from participants throughout the study. Measures like overlapping of methods such as interviews and site visits to collect data to ensure the credibility of findings, which in turn takes care of the dependability of the study (Sarma, 2015). A detailed description provided in outlining the foundation and strategies in undertaking this study included stating the conditions for choosing the research participants. Triangulation is the use of multiple sources to aid in a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon study. Triangulation requires using various sources of data and methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon (Anton, 2015). The use of the company's records and archival documents were used to triangulate data in the study. Leoni (2015) stated that validity in qualitative research means "appropriateness" of the tools, processes, and data. In a case study, a scholar-practitioner can achieve validation through various procedures and tactics such as methodical triangulation, peer review analysis, and prolonged engagement.

Methodical triangulation from the interviews and document reviews ensured the collection of data, using multiple sources, to supplement interview and observation data, which aided in fulfilling the study objectives and contributing to the depth in the answers to the research question. The interpretation of the research findings from the undertaken and study presented herein could provide insights for future practitioners and researchers to continue to generate new data for the fashion boutique industry. Cope (2014) noted that researchers should provide adequate information on the participants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the study findings of being transferable to other contexts. The two strategies many researchers use to determine confirmability is an audit trail and reflexivity. The audit trail helps clarify to readers how the scholar interpreted the data collected when conducting the study. We utilized an audit trail and reflexivity strategies for the research as presented in this manuscript. Data saturation was determined and discernible to the researcher, who can take cues once the data becomes consistent and no new data seemingly emerges, thereby denoting the achievement of this stage in the data collection. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbin (2015) stated that data saturation refers to reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data contribute to little or nothing new to the research.

#### **A Brief on Data Analysis**

The purpose of this qualitative, multiple case study was to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to combat the threat of online retailing. The interviews were analyzed using a process of data reduction and constant comparison, to facilitate the emergence of key themes from the most frequently occurring conversations in the interviews.

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

The fashion boutique business owners interviewed in this study presented information and discernible strategies to overcome the challenges experienced when trying to remain sustainable against online competitors. Before the start of the interviews, all participants received a copy of the informed

consent form for personal records. Each participant signed an additional copy of the consent form to denote willingness and voluntary participation in the study. After 5 to 7 days from the initial interviews, there were 15 minutes of follow-up semistructured interviews as an additional measure to confirm and achieve data saturation. Data saturation is defined as the point in data collection and analysis when no new themes emerge or present new or fundamental changes or revelation to the existing and repetitive data already collected (Hagaman & Wutch, 2017). We reviewed the participants' sales reports and the SBA website to show the validity of the triangulation by using multiple sources of secondary data to supplement the primary information collected for this study. The protection of the confidentiality of each participant was achieved by assigning codes. The code assignment was P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 for each participant. The main goal of using analytical software was to determine which words appeared frequently and facilitate the emergence of the most dominant themes reflective of the strategies and business prudence in an environment of constant change, which these fashion retailers operate in. While conducting the data analysis, we focused on evaluating and analyzing themes that were pertinent to the overarching research question and used the theoretical underpinnings presented in the conceptual framework for deeper and holistic consumer behavioral analysis. When small business owners give back to the community, such initiatives also promote positive social change in geographical location and the business may earn some equity and appreciation in customer acquisition and retention as well.

The first dominant theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was found to be the importance and role of marketing in business sustainability. Social media is virtually free and a technological option to enhance customer choice behavior by increasing awareness of a business, and it may serve traditional businesses to have an active online presence, which Figure 1 below depicts the first theme:



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

The second major theme that emerged from the data analysis of the interviews, was attributed to fashion trends. The participant responses on the theme may denote the importance of keeping in tune with consumer trends and fashion based on the data collected. The last major and important theme that emerged from the data collected and expressed by privately owned fashion boutique owners, was the significance and importance to monitor and keep abreast of customer preference. Small business owners in this domain, must dedicate attention to monitor and consider customer preference, choices, behavioral trends, and wants, including the ability to sources, deliver, and offer products that customers may not find online or in other boutiques. Figure 2 denotes the final theme that emerged:





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