

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Strategic Imperatives for Privately Owned Fashion Boutiques in the Southeast United States

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## Abstract

Consumers have greater purchase choice options to fulfill their wants and desires in a networked world. In the United States fashion business, privately owned brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques face the unique challenge of strategically competing with online retailers who usually have low overheads and inventories. Low adaptability, limited innovation, and inadequate attention to a changing marketing landscape could be responsible for the decline in the survival rate of several traditional, or pure brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques. Newer approaches may be essential for traditional and online entrepreneurs, to increase adaptability and business sustainability and in increasing customer marketing outreach. Grounded in the general systems theory, the research conducted in this qualitative study was with the invocation of a multiple case design and entailed gaining insight into the exploration of strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners in contending with the purely online retailers. Semi-structured 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 was an important prerequisite for participation criteria in the study, as also indicated merit in studying the critical success factors in traditional fashion retailing. The 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 the fashion industry. From a thematic analysis of the interview data, the major emergent themes were the importance of the business success of marketing strategies, cognizance of fashion trends and the role of customer preference in economic success respectively. The ensuing knowledge from the utilization of the study may serve to increase the success rates of traditional and online fashion startups and possibly provide knowledge on the strategic imperatives for these businesses to compete in an online business world.

**Keywords:** Traditional stores, boutiques, theoretical lens, conceptual framework logistics, marketing, and research.

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## 1. Background and Introduction

Several traditional small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the clothing retail space face the existential threat of obsolescence and closure, with the exponential growth of online retailers. Chiou et al. <sup>[1]</sup> noted that consumer convenience is a critical factor in shopping decisions and may account for the increase in shopping over the Internet, often to the competitive disadvantage of a traditional brick-and-mortar store. The online fashion retail market is increasingly a trend, which threatens the survivability of pure brick-and-mortar fashion stores, who are not fully committed to embracing online selling. Several researchers such as Li et al. <sup>[2]</sup> have cited, that with online retailing, brick-and-mortar retailers, and small business retailers could face new opportunities and challenges.<sup>[3]</sup> Noted that building customer trust is critical for online fashion retailers, arguably more of an

imperative in traditional stores and boutiques, as there is a higher risk when purchasing over the Internet, in the wake of perhaps an ever-decreasing trend in face-to-face transactions. Limited knowledge and information on Internet fashion mean that there are 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, of the two different approaches, which however necessitate a customer-centric focus. The paucity of knowledge in fashion retailing 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 a surge in Internet fashion retailing. Several entrepreneurs provide services in a specified geographical location

to consumers. In the state of South Carolina, the United States in 2011 had 71,201 small firms in the retail trade business.<sup>[4]</sup> SME owners have been instrumental in contributing to job creation and poverty alleviation in the state. Strategically disposed businesses have often 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 by the Internet and technology.

Entrepreneurship involves risk-taking and the implementation of innovative strategy activities.<sup>[5]</sup> Oguonu <sup>[6]</sup> suggested that effective entrepreneurship demands the decision-making functions of preparation, establishing, guiding, and managing employees are critical to being successful. The mindset of small businesses must be to remain sustainable and retain consumers, and the imperatives are for firms to be adaptive and customer responsive, to acquire and retain customers. Entrepreneurs are frequently successful and sustainable in innovative efforts to earn profitability, vital in the critical 5-year period of formation, during which time many are susceptible to failure and are vulnerable. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to gain insight into the strategies that traditional fashion boutique owners use to survive in an environment of increasing online retailing. The tendency to purchase online, like Shanthi and Kannaiah <sup>[7]</sup> deemed, is primarily for personal convenience, as there are fewer customer constraints of geography and time in making purchases. The disadvantage of the traditional brick-and-mortar stores is in the fixed hours of operations, as opposed to the ability of online retailers to operate on a 24/7 basis.

## 2. The Retail Dilemma Explored

Retail trends and statistics have indicated that an estimated 40% of Americans increasingly shop online weekly and monthly which is the reason why online sales have continued to increase, from \$287 billion in 2014 to a projected \$523 billion in 2020. The simple premise underlying these statistics is that 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.<sup>[8]</sup> Online shopping trends have manifested in traditional retail store closures of 278 million square feet in the southeast United States between 2015 and 2016.<sup>[9]</sup> The terms of the specific business problem, it is evident that the alarmingly high failure rate of many traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutique retailers lies in not adequately and innovatively developing and implementing adaptive marketing strategies. in a transformative environment, which depicts an exponential increase in online retailing.

## 3. Aim of Research

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study 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 pre-pandemic environment of 2019, arguably which saw an exponential increase in online retailing, which only surged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The population for this study, were 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 drawn included five fashion boutique owners who presented strategies to stay afloat amidst the increase in online retailing. Knowledge from the findings of this study could serve to advance the business awareness and the imperatives for adaptive and innovative marketing by fashion boutique businesses in the southeast United States and may be of interest to other entrepreneurs as well in fashion retailing.

## 4. Qualitative Research a Fit with the Research Objectives

The research aims to explore insights of retail professionals prompted by undertaking a qualitative study. Yin <sup>[10]</sup> advised that qualitative studies are suitable for gathering context-intensive and rich data through direct contact with participants in their natural environments. Researchers Murshed and Zhang <sup>[11]</sup> held 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 the marketing and business development in traditional fashion retailing. This qualitative study involved using a multiple case study design, as the aim was to study fashion retailers and triangulate the primary findings against other sources of credible secondary information, 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.<sup>[12]</sup>

## 5. 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?

## 6. Theoretical Underpinning

The general systems theory (GST) advanced by Bertalanffy<sup>[13]</sup> underpinned the study and represented the underlying theoretical lens and served as the conceptual framework for this study. Bertalanffy deemed that the GST may explain some special systems and decision theory. The postulations of the GST were useful from a theoretical perspective as provided additional points of reference in the data analysis and interpretations of the primary data, supplemented

with 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 GST, therefore, was invaluable in gaining a deeper understanding of the challenges traditional retailers face in keeping pace with customer choice behavioral propensities for convenience. Mania-Singer <sup>[14]</sup> similarly derived benefits in using the GST, by applying its principles in business and organizational performance enhancement measures and mechanisms. The fundamental premises of this theory, lie in the supposition, that adaptability and decision optimization are critical in business, and hence provided the theoretical perspective and—underpinned this study.

## 7. Study Contribution to Knowledge and It's Potential Significance

The findings from this study may be of significance to traditional fashion boutique owners, who seek to counter online retailing and thereby increase profitability and sustainability in traditional. The study may contribute to increasing the knowledge and ability of fashion businesses and employees in enhancing profitability, job creation, and in some way, even potentially improving the standard of living of communities in the southeast United States. The study findings may be of significance therefore to small business owners as it has led to the unearthing of strategies privately-owned fashion boutique owners in the southeast United States implement to ensure business sustainability.

## 8. Professional and Academic Literature Review

The central question for the study was: What strategies do successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques use to negate online retailers? The purpose of the professional and academic literature review is to summarize, compare, and contrast numerous quality academic and practitioner studies and viewpoints aligned to the research topic. Hosseini <sup>[15]</sup> noted that critical e-literature reviews are vital in conducting rigorous studies to aid in presenting the foundations of the study, its rationale, and more. A high-quality critique and analysis of literature is helpful to the researchers in acquiring in-depth knowledge and was undertaken and observed as true for this study as well. Quality and insightful literature reviews often provide a breadth of knowledge for a researcher to show the depth of the research. For this study, 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.

## 9. General Systems Theory (GST)

The theoretical underpinning of the general systems theory provided the theoretical lens. The

GST was developed by Bertalanffy in 1968 and served as the conceptual framework for this study. In real-world settings, 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 as a system, perhaps valuable in formulating and implementing suitable strategies for growth and sustainability. Simola <sup>[16]</sup> favored the relevance of the analogy of the GST to organizational settings, in 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.<sup>[17]</sup> 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.

The GST analogy is evident, in that 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 interdependence of organizational systems within the enterprise may serve to foster 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 the tenuousness and collaborative complexities in an organization by implementing strategies, which are focused on harmonizing different cultures and management styles, along with the critical necessity to empower employees, albeit with accountability. The GST connotations in its, postulations, denote that complex adaptive and balancing mechanisms may aid an organization in negotiating the challenges imposed by internal and external environments.<sup>[18]</sup> Entrepreneurs could potentially overcome challenges in cohesion, using synergism and drawing from the power of different elements, unified to the common organizational good.

Repurposing open systems, with a focus on cohesion within the business enterprise of any size and dimension, may help to simplify complex processes in business operations, using human and technological adaptiveness and agility.<sup>[19]</sup> The numerous examples of lessons from successful organizations have indicated that entrepreneurs could simplify complex systems by implementing appropriate adaptive strategies in the organization and enhance the competencies for survivability. Innovation in building cohesive enterprises is vital in an uncertain environment beset by constant change. For this study, 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 for the enterprise to remain profitable and sustainable. Ceric<sup>[20]</sup> suggested that a system must be created in a business and its success in progress and continuance is often determined by the formulation and implementation of carefully enacted strategies aimed at building and maintaining harmonious relations with other systems within the organization. It is known that businesses operate in a repetitive sphere of cyclic activities and produce products or services for consumers. The strategic organizational management disposition 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, of significance when there are challenges.<sup>[21]</sup> 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.<sup>[22]</sup> The GST formally presented by Bertalanffy (1968), initially was proposed in the context of biology and explained as the optimal organizational functioning, when it is with the efficient working relationship of the different parts of the entire body and coordination function, as cited in the context of vertebrate and intelligent biological entities.<sup>[23]</sup>

The biological synergies of different systems 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's 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<sup>[24]</sup> 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 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,<sup>[25]</sup> and were the reason for selecting it to underpin this study.

## 10. The Living Systems Theory

Járos<sup>[26]</sup> noted that the living systems theory, considered to be a subcategory of the GST concerning 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.<sup>[27]</sup> 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,<sup>[28]</sup> 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 the critical factors influencing system efficiency. Living systems are closed systems that need special attention,<sup>[29]</sup> where different operations in a business may need careful handling to complete the task. The inferences derived, is that business owners, must adapt to the environment around them 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,<sup>[30]</sup> 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 adapted 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.<sup>[31]</sup> Ham<sup>[32]</sup> 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.

### 11. Business Strategies in a Global Environment

An emphasis on knowledge management (KM) and the inter-organizational model is often favored by business practitioners and strategists and comprises four innovative performance essentials: systematic innovation, innovation process management, resource integration, and marketplace performance.<sup>[33]</sup> Business owners could use KM in innovatively using its principles and best practices in product development. Furthermore, managing change and change management is critical as well for business development, especially in the early stages of business growth and development.<sup>[34]</sup> Cohesion and collaboration within the business often serve organizations to implement new ideas and innovate product development and for varied offerings to consumers.

Outsourcing is regarded as a key enabler to achieving superior optimization of resources, economic acuity, and passing on some gains to the customer, which often translates into financial benefits for the business.<sup>[35]</sup> Strategic sourcing has appeared to be a vital enabler in the international supply chain, to also offers risk minimization, arising in part from the diversity of a supply chain and the role economics plays in business sustainability. Sourcing alternatives may be vital for companies in the fashion industry to contend with rivals in an emerging global market, where the ability to have inventory on time, prevents the loss of customers.

When operating on a global scale, companies must develop customized best practices<sup>||</sup> to remain competitive and sustainable in a hypercompetitive marketplace. Pandey and Rhee <sup>[36]</sup> advised that effective CEOs use innovative ideas to manage change while displaying ethical conduct in the entire sphere of operations and influence. Implementing adaptive strategies increases business success.<sup>[37]</sup> Successful small business owners can derive advantages in partnering with other entrepreneurs and sharing information, to derive mutual synergies and benefits.

### 12. Entrepreneurship in Small Business Contexts

Entrepreneurs should 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. Effective entrepreneurship, therefore, necessitates 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.<sup>[6]</sup> Business owner prudence may be evident when there is a strategic plan in place to help avoid failure, and management may have to infuse the strategic blueprint, according to a gap analysis and shoring up innovative capabilities. Duke <sup>[38]</sup> cautioned, that a limited cognizance of the five competitive forces in strategy formulation and execution may limit success. The forces 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. Businesspeople of all ages and years of experience must make sound decisions, and ensure that products and service offerings are always delivered with integrity and upright ethical conduct 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 businesses must optimize human and other resources at their disposal to help facilitate sustainability in an emerging business world. Entrepreneurship can be a positive transformational opportunity with the informed and judicious business engagement on display and evident, and adaptability is often a key differentiating factor of successful enterprises.<sup>[39]</sup>

### 13. Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

Mwangola found that organizations could derive supply chain flexibility by purchasing products and services from various sources 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. Neagu noted that only 10% of SMEs survive beyond 5 years or more in the market. There are risks involved with outsourcing that managers must understand to increase sustainability, notably when there is a disruption in the supply chain, products become limited in availability to consumers and other businesses. Effective execution of knowledge management often results in making successful strategic outsourcing and other business choices and decisions. Business owners must revamp the company's strategic plan to become successful on the international level and compete with other small business owners. It is perhaps common knowledge, that SMEs in the United States is truly the backbone of the economy. Small business operations on an international scale, require flexibility and alternate and backup strategies to factor in uncertainty and also content successfully with the competition. Hsieh and Chou suggested that when SMEs engage in international operations, with originality and creativity, it is likely to be successful in such ventures.<sup>[40]</sup>

#### 14. 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 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. 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 et al. 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, and 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 in large organizations, where firms, with a designated development team, often handle 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. Networking plays a vital role in businesses remaining sustainable in an ever-changing market. Sharafizad and Coetzer 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. [40,41,42,43,44,45,46,47,48,49]

#### 15. Online Retailing

From an economic standpoint, 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. From a technology analysis, firstly it was evident that 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. Secondly, staying abreast of 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. Li, Lu, and Talebian opined that online retailers and traditional retailers may implement very dissimilar strategies in the wake of different operating models, predicated on economics and the costs of carrying inventories. [50,51,52,53,54,55,56,57,58]

Some traditional brick-and-mortar business forays into the e-commerce world to help revenue generation, on the other hand, some 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 since consumers only see images of merchandise until it is delivered. It is often found that 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. Fashion boutiques or large retail stores must find alternatives to sell and reduce inventory levels after trends become obsolete. Shao noted, that aligning with Forrester's forecasts and models has positively served 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. A problem often state about online retailing is that consumers cannot physically inspect it and have to wait until the product is delivered to do so, unlike in a brick-and-mortar store, where the product could be seen in person. Balan and Mathew opined that consumer purchase decisions are often predicated on reviews and testimonials. Monitoring consumer trends and behavior is vital as the attitude and behavior of individuals when making an online purchase could help determine if the consumer will make a future purchase. [58,59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68,69,70]

#### 16. Technology

Companies should be able to advantageously leverage technology within the organization to be successful and competitive with other firms. Employees often must be trained to use technology strategically and advantageously. Reich noted that technology entails all that is involved in the dissemination of communication and information to influence employees and customers and consumers. Social media in that respect is another valuable tool that small business owners should use in consumer engagement. Some business owners utilize social media to receive feedback on products, which could also aid in improving products and service quality. Entrepreneurs could benefit from the findings of this study as well, as consistent with the views of researchers, we also suggest using social media as a tool (i.e., surveys or feedback) for forecasting consumer demand for products. As a conduit to interaction, Omar argued that social networking involves fostering and augmenting relations between corporations and internal and external stakeholders and consumers.

Within the business enterprise, the appropriate integration of technology could help promote competitive spirit in the internal and external environment. Entrepreneurs are left with little choice but to use social media as an advantage to help stay sustainable with competing firms. Small business owners may also benefit from community engagement

to aid business development, when implemented may help managers surpass the vulnerability of the first 5 years from the business formation. Regrettably, some business owners neglect to stay current with technology, which should be a consideration for traditional fashion retailers. For instance, small businesses that incorporate apps for consumers to use to purchase products have an advantage over owners that continue to stick with the traditional way of conducting operations. Loyalty programs also play a significant role in building company-consumer relations and influence competitive advantage over competitors reasoned, that technology could facilitate business and customer relationships for the organization, and within it as well. Technology continues to play a critical role in the business world because companies could use it to market, receive feedback on a product, and network with other suppliers and client organizations. The Internet has helped some small business owners remain profitable because e-commerce is changing how firms operate and is leveraged, which is also pertinent to traditional fashion retailers. [71,72,73,74,75]

### 17. Retail Realities and Contemporary Business Knowledge

Marketers and 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 such as 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 for bankruptcy, which may indicate a failure to meet the demands of the online retailing world. [76,77,78,79,80,81,82]

### 18. The Research for this Study

The research strategy for this study entailed a focus on achieving comprehensive data collection and involved 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 goal was to achieve data saturation in data and thoroughness in gaining detailed insights of those interviewed. Data saturation is often manifested, where after conducting multiple interviews, redundancy in the information appears as with interviews, or subsequent participants, offer views already provided by preceding interviewees. This repetitive information from participants, and no new information emerging, is reflective of this level of comprehensiveness and is verification in the accomplishment of data saturation. In this study, 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 successful 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 inclusionary criteria and selection of participants were to include successful 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 congruence with the overarching research question to achieve the objective of the study. We assigned each participant a unique identifier to ensure and protect confidentiality throughout the study. [83,84,85,86,87,88,89,90]

### 19. Research Method, Design Appropriateness and Data Quality

A qualitative method and a case study design were deemed appropriate for this research. The rationale for selecting a research method and design is to choose the most appropriate approach to answer the principal research question. Vohra 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, may serve in collecting and analyzing data and thereafter, in developing suitable conclusions with the appropriate invocation of a theoretical underpinning, as denoted in the conceptual framework. The execution of the study was complemented with 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. In qualitative research, the depth of insight of participants is critical rather than a set number of participants, and the emphasis is on achievement of sufficiency and saturation, using quality data collected and analyzed. 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, 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.

The study was undertaken with safeguards and measures in place to prevent any possible ethical concerns and incidents, during the duration of the research. The written transcripts from the recordings of participant interviews yielded valuable information on business success and sustainability. The participants were informed that there were no incentives for

participating in the study. The participants who met the inclusionary criteria for participating in this study received an informed consent form, to sign and were contacted in person or by telephone to discuss the time and dates of suitability to partake in the semistructured interviews.

## 20. Data Collection in the Research Undertaken

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. Yin noted that qualitative researchers in undertaking a case study, may also derive additional information from any of the six sources: (a) documentation, (b) archival records, (c) direct observation, (d) interviews, (e) participants' observation, and (f) physical artifacts. A case study served to focus on the topic and enhance the reliability of the research. The case study protocol consisted of an overview of the study project, data collection, data collection question, and a guide for the study report. West 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. After the completion of the interviews, instituting member checking assured the precision of interview recordings. Holistic data and analysis can render a quality study, as multiple data sources are recommended rather than only one source to capture the contextual complexity of the phenomenon under exploration and these case study imperatives were adhered to in this study.

## 21. Quality Measures in Data Collection

With the aims and purpose of this business study in mind, the most appropriate research approach that was used to answer the research question was a qualitative exploratory, multiple case study. Yu et al., noted that case study research is conducive to gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, within the unique context of the study. An important approach also used in the study was methodological triangulation. The use of archival documents and observations of the participants was considered, and important retail industry secondary sources of data triangulation were used in the analysis.

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 of the information, which also offered an opportunity for a participant to amend or add additional data and insight to the phenomenon. A transcript review was also implemented in this study, which is a process where the participants are provided verbatim transcripts after the conclusion of the interviews, so participants had the opportunity to clarify and offer further perspectives. As stated, member checking is offered as a review of freshly

transcribed interviews, and again after the final analysis in this study. A Sony® ICD BX140 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. To further ingrain thoroughness, during the duration of the interviews, we took notes of observations, thoughts, facial expressions, and body language.

## 22. Data Analysis

After the completion of verification of the accuracy of the participants' data, the process of data assembly and analysis involved the use of NVivo® 12 software. Jacobs, 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.

## 23. Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are typically associated with quantitative research, nevertheless, different facets with the same goals and outcomes can be applied to qualitative research. For consistency and uniformity, all participants were asked the same open-ended interview questions, by adhering to the interview protocol. The desired level of enhanced reliability necessitated incorporating various strategies, such as methodical triangulation, member checking, constant comparison of analysis, and other such techniques implemented and ingrained 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. Outlining the foundation and strategies in undertaking this study included stating in detail, the conditions for choosing the research participants. Triangulation implemented in this study is in 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. In this study, a review of company records and archival documents was used to triangulate data in the study. Leoni stated that validity in qualitative research means —appropriateness|| of the tools, processes, and data. In adherence to best practices, in this qualitative case study, as scholar-practitioners, we sought and achieved validation through various measures such as methodical triangulation, peer review analysis, and prolonged participant engagement to collect saturated and comprehensive data.

The fullness of methodical triangulation from the interviews and document reviews in this study helped ensure the collection of data, which meant using multiple sources, to supplement interview and observation data, which aided in fulfilling the study objectives and contributing to the depth of the answers to the research question. The extensive analysis and interpretation



of the research findings from the undertaken study presented herein could provide strategic knowledge and insights for future practitioners and researchers for the fashion boutique industry to expand market share and financial success. Cope argued that researchers should provide adequate information on the participants and the research context to enable the reader to assess the study findings as being transferable to the type of businesses studied, and perhaps transferable and relevant in other contexts.

Pertinent strategies many researchers use to determine confirmability are an audit trail and reflexivity. The use of an audit trail can clarify for readers, how the scholar has interpreted the data collected when conducting the study. We utilized an audit trail and reflexivity strategies for the research as outlined and discussed in this manuscript. As stated in the detailed descriptions on data saturation herein, it was determined and discernible to us researchers, as cues were taken in the interviews when we found at a certain stage, the participant sounded repetitious thereby signaling the achievement of this stage in the data collection. Gentles confirmed that data saturation refers to reaching a point of informational redundancy where additional data contribute to little or nothing new to the research.

## 24. A Brief on Data Analysis

This qualitative, multiple case study aimed to explore business strategies used by successful brick-and-mortar fashion boutique owners to strategically act to combat the threat of online retailing. The semi-structured interviews and the data collected, were analyzed using thematic reviews, using data reduction, and a constant comparison process, which facilitated the emergence of key themes from the most frequently occurring conversations in the interviews, which yielded strategic imperatives.

## 25. Presentation of Study Findings

The insights of fashion boutique business owners interviewed in this study led to uncovering of important strategies to overcome the challenges experienced when trying to remain sustainable against online competitors. Participants received in advance, a copy of the informed consent form for personal records. Each participant signed a consent form to denote willingness and voluntary participation in the study. After 5 to 7 days from the initial interviews, 15 minutes of follow-up semistructured interviews were undertaken, as an additional measure to confirm and achieve data saturation. Data saturation is achieved when no new themes emerge in the interviews in respect of the existing data already collect. Our review of participants' sales reports and the SBA website denoted efforts to increase the validity using triangulation by reviewing multiple sources of secondary data to supplement the primary information collected for this study. The protection of the confidentiality of each participant was ensured by assigning codes. The code assignment was

P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5 for each participant. The main goal of using qualitative data analysis 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, in which these fashion retailers operate. 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. Social responsibility is fulfilled when small business owners give back to the community. Such initiatives also contribute to 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 was the importance and role of marketing in business sustainability. Using social media is virtually cost-free and a communication option to deftly 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:

The second major theme was attributed to fashion trends. The participant responses on the theme may reflect 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 imperative to monitor and keep abreast of customer preference. Small business owners in this domain, must dedicate attention to monitoring and considering customer preferences, choices, behavioral trends, and wants, including the ability to source, deliver, and offer products that customers may not find online or in other boutiques. Figure 2 denotes the final theme that emerged:

Several minor themes also emerged from the analysis of the data analysis, notably the importance of participating in community events and product shelf life, obsolescence, and the identification of products that are less affected by time and trends. The astute monitoring of industry data by small business owners of traditional fashion enterprises will likely offer diligent insight into strategic options for current and potential privately-owned fashion boutique owners. The exponential use of social media in marketing could play an integral part in business sustainability and provides communication channels for small business owners to engage and market to current and potential customers. Many traditional fashion retailers and brands have swiftly incorporated social media into customer marketing and outreach strategies in a local and global context, where feasible, as cited by Ananda.

The evolution of technology imperils adoption laggards and is making some traditional small business fashion boutique owners embrace and adapt to infuse newer customer outreach approaches to remain profitable as online shopping continues to prosper.

physically accessible to customers in stores, and this avoids customers waiting days for the merchandise to arrive.



**Figure 1. Role of Marketing in Business Sustainability.**



### Figure 2. Fashion Trends

Meraviglia cited the remoteness and distance of online shopping when purchasing products online, since

## 26. Study Findings Through the Lens of the General Systems Theory

Bertalanffy coined the GST, which was used as the conceptual framework that underpinned this study. Using the lens of the GST aided in recognizing strategies by the participating successful privately-owned fashion boutique owners. Three primary themes that emerged from the analysis appeared to be relevant when looking at the commonalities in strategies to negate the threat of online retailing. The overall outcome of this study was that innovation and adaptive business strategies are crucial for the fashion retail industry, operating in purely traditional or other forms of online and hybrid retailing. The ability to adapt and innovate within an environment is critical, and creative thinking skills and management is often the critical differentiator in the business becoming obsolete, or productively sustainable. The proactive and innovative disposition and strategies we found in this study have also helped to overcome challenges and seemed to be the critical success factors of the interviewed fashion boutique owners in attaining continuous business profitability. The crucial period of business susceptibility and survival is usually the first 5 years from business formation, registration, startup, and commencement of sales operations for privately owned fashion boutiques.

## 27. Applications to Professional Business and Marketing

The formulation of the strategies from the

findings of the study could provide current and future fashion boutique owners with some thoughts on strategies to help counter the threat of pure online retailers. The high failure rates of traditional brick-and-mortar fashion boutiques and economic loss have been a concern for organizational leaders in the geographic region and within the community, where this research study was undertaken. [91,92]

## 28. Recommendations for Action

The findings and discoveries of this study may additionally provide insights to the human and technological solutions to meeting customer needs, by leveraging social media and other innovative approaches and thus advance the successes of businesses. Imbibing the innovation and creative strategies used by successful traditional brick-and-mortar business owners could aid in understanding the imperative of how to remain sustainable in the face of an increasing presence of online retailers. The research revealed the benefits of a hybrid approach of combining traditional a physical and brick-and-mortar presence with online selling capabilities, where feasible, or hastening transformation to this possibility, is an important prudent recommendation. Building customer rapport, customer retention, leveraging social media, and enhancing good customer service through this hybrid approach may result in greater customer outreach and marketing options. [93,94]

## 29. Further Study

The findings of this study may hold profound

insights and knowledge and could be of value about how traditional small business fashion retailers use strategies to help combat the threat from pure online competition. We recommend researchers look at other industries besides the small business retail fashion boutiques while finding alternative ways to develop strategies to address online retailing, by those who have physical stores and have adapted to a shifting terrain or technology and traditional retailing. Additional studies could be invaluable in advancing strategic understandings on how one incorporates the use of social media and technology in fashion retailing and to help gain a finer perspective on innovative approaches to promote products or receive feedback from consumers. From this study, it was apparent, that traditional business owners and online competitors would likely reap greater economic dividends by instituting loyalty programs, as may be feasible to retain customers. For purely physically located retail, without an online presence, in the form of traditional privately-owned fashion boutique business owners, the threat of online retailing warrants action, and local brick-and-mortar stores need to remain sustainable, with only innovation potentially holding the key to business sustainability. Sometimes the reluctance to participate in a study is for fear that it could bring exposure to the company on its performance. Assuring confidentiality and reinforcing the academic purpose of this study, in contributing to business knowledge, proved useful in gaining participant trust and successful completion.

### 30. Conclusion

Arguably smaller businesses can compete by leveraging human ingenuity and low-cost online technologies. The combination of a physical location and online selling may aid in competing with large and major fashion retailers such as Walmart, Target, and Amazon. Some of the resources and strategies are networking with other small business fashion boutiques, attending fashion shows, or searching the National Retail Foundation website to stay current with the latest fashion trends.

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