SOCIAL CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT IN RURAL COMMERCE:

A STUDY OF SMALL BUSINESSES IN SOUTHERN WEST VIRGINIA

by

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

The limited-resource context in which small businesses operate impedes the ability of the

proprietors of small businesses in implementing customer relationship management.  Despite the

availability of a more cost-effective alternative in the form of social customer relationship

management, there is a failure to utilize the practice because of a lack of knowledge of the use of

social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management.  The purpose of

this study was to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management

has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia.  The study used a qualitative

research methodology and a case study design.  A total of 20 participants were equally drawn

from four county chambers of commerce in Southern West Virginia using the stratified sampling

method.  One-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted on the participants and data

analyzed through thematic analysis.  Contrary to the initial hypothesis, the findings showed that

the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential of social

customer relationship management.  The emergent themes included aiding in decision-making,

enhancing customer engagement, increasing visibility of the business and cultivating customer

loyalty.  The findings showed limited use of formalized marketing plans to complement social

customer relationship management.  Limitations of the sample size were appreciated, and

recommendations for future studies with a clustered sample including ethnic, minority, and

women-owned businesses were made.  In addition to recommendations for the use of a

conversational tone, addressing feedback with positivity, and implementing social customer

relationship management, it was also recommended for the proprietors of small businesses to use

analytics in order to benefit from the data collected from their customers.

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Dedication

I dedicate my applied doctoral research project to my family, friends, and those special individuals that have provided direction throughout the many years of my life.  A special feeling of gratitude to my wife, who has patiently waited as I completed the doctoral process and stood by me as I sought to fulfill the goal of obtaining it.  I love you for the devotion that you have shown me during our lives together.

I also dedicate this research to those hard working business owners that took time out of their already busy schedules to assist me in obtaining my research material.  Without those generous souls I would not have been able to obtain the essential information necessary in order to move forward with my own educational ambitions.  Thank you for the opportunity to visit with each of you, allowing me to witness the genuine enthusiasm that each displayed regarding your successful business enterprises.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

This section of the proposal provides a justification for this qualitative study. It includes a section on the background of the problem. This section details what is known about social customer relationship management and its use by small businesses and what is not known as a lead up to the problem statement of this qualitative study. This section also includes the problem statement where the general and specific problems to be addressed by this qualitative study are outlined. The nature of the study discusses both the method and design to be used in the study and a justification of the selection of the specific methods at the expense of other alternatives. This section also includes information on the research questions, conceptual framework, the definition of operational terms, assumptions, delimitations and limitations, the significance of the study, and a review of the literature.

**Background of the Problem**

Implementing the various components of marketing requires the respective organizations to use different types of resources. The successful implementation of customer relationship management requires an organization to strike a balance between the priorities for resources among the various operational needs and the need for technologies, people, and processes (Nguyen & Waring, 2013). The same sentiments are also found in the arguments by Srivastava (2012) that technology largely drives customer relationship management. Various processes within the businesses require automation to aid in the collection of the data required to facilitate customer relationship management. Some of the technological solutions proposed to achieve the level of automation required to facilitate customer relationship management include electronic points of sales, sales force automation, call centers, and customer service helpdesks (Srivastava, 2012).

The technological solutions above are resource intensive. They compete for resources with the routine operations of an organization. This aspect impedes the implementation of customer relationship management in small businesses that have an inadequacy of resources. Intralak and Olsson (2011) found that the inadequacy of resources was a common problem in small businesses. The competition for the few available resources is weighed against the investment in some of the technological solutions listed above by Srivastava (2012). In spite of the inadequacy of resources, customer relationship management remains an important marketing function for small businesses if they are to remain competitive against their competitors and ensure their financial and business survival. Harrigan and Miles (2014) argued that the ability of small businesses to forge and sustain strong relationships with their customers is one of the multiplicities of factors that predict their competitiveness and business success.

Even so, the proprietors of the small Southern West Virginia businesses are cognizant of the realities that affect their businesses. Consequently, they justifiably prioritize the resources available for operational functions such as replenishing inventories, payment of utilities, and maintaining the payroll. Even with an understanding of the fact that investing in the technological solutions for customer relationship management can help revitalize their businesses, the expensive tags that come with the mainstream customer relationship management is often discouraging (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Baumeister (2002) also noted the prioritization of resources against these investments. Several years later, Dargam et al. (2012) still found that despite credible industry evidence showing that large organizations have benefited immensely from the use of business decision support systems, the operators of small businesses still find the required capital investment to be too large for their limited coffers.

While appreciating the impeding effect of the inadequacy of resources, it is noteworthy that there are solutions to which the proprietors of small businesses can look to achieve the important business function of customer relationship management. Recent disruptive innovations in digital communications have provided a variety of digital communication channels using which the proprietors of small businesses can engage with their customer through the frameworks of customer relationship management. The benefit of these avenues is partially because they allow the small businesses to engage in customer engagement without necessarily incurring the large capital investments needed for acquiring the mainstream and professional tools for customer relationship management practices. The solutions in digital communications alluded to above are in the form of social media platforms. These avenues are a reprieve for the proprietors of small businesses who are inclined towards customer relationship management but are hampered by the lack of available resources. A reprieve is in part expected by the fact that many of the customers whom the small businesses target in their marketing endeavors use many of the available social media platforms. The proprietors of the small businesses can then exploit this double coincidence.

The proliferation of the internet as well as Internet-enabled devices such as smartphones has increased the significance of social media as one of the channels of digital communication available for businesses (Rosman & Stuhura, 2013). As a result, social media has proven influential for both personal and business communication. Social media, owing to its ability to communicate business brands, products, and services, has been branded the novel e-word of mouth (Gholston, Koufie, & Hakim, 2016). Even with limited resources, the proprietors of small businesses can now engage in social customer relationship management. They can communicate

their brands, products, and services to their customers while also addressing their concerns through the various facilities available on social media platforms.

Even with the availability and potency of the solutions in digital communication avenues, Bridge (2017) found that the proprietors of the small businesses are not using the social media platforms to meet their needs for customer relationship management. The author theorized that the failure to use the cost-effective digital communication channels is attributed to the lack of awareness of their use and the potential that the technology could provide in meeting the marketing needs of their businesses. The work by Newby, Nguyen, and Waring (2014) also reflected the same observations when making inquiry into the marketing practices that the proprietors of small businesses use to communicate with their customers. It is important to understand this issue considering that effective customer relationship management is likely to promote the small businesses ability to compete and address their inability to afford the resource-intensive mainstream software designed for professional customer relationship management.

An inquiry into this issue will help in understanding whether the failure to use the available cost-effective channels is because of a lack of awareness of the use of social media platforms or a lack of awareness of the importance of customer relationship management. This inquiry can help in the design of approaches to expose the proprietors of the small Southern West Virginia businesses to the potential benefits of Web 2.0, the accompanying digital communication technologies and big data technologies (Orenga-Rogla & Chalmeta, 2016).

Another dimension of the background is the influence of age on the use of social media and how it relates to its appropriateness form small businesses (Roesler, 2015). The issue of concern is whether the users of social media sites are also the target customers of small businesses. This dimension is important because social customer relationship management will

be ineffective if the small businesses use social media sites for the purpose of social customer relationship management when their customers do not use these digital communication channels frequently.  A report by Roesler (2015) showed that social media has an influence on the purchase behavior of 47% of the millennial.  The influence of social media on the purchase behavior of other age groups was 19%.  These empirical findings show the importance of age as a dimension.  It is a dimension that the researcher explored with the chosen study population to determine whether age was an influence in their use of social customer relationship management.

The background to the problem helps create a context through which the general and specific problems to be addressed by the qualitative study can be understood and justified.  The review of literature identified prevailing problems in the cognate field of marketing and for the proprietors of small businesses.  This problem is the form of a gap between the resource-intensive professional software and technological tools for customer relationship management and the limited resources in the coffers of the small businesses.  The review of the literature has also highlighted solutions such as the cost-effective avenues of digital communication in the form of social media platforms.  Even then, it has been shown that the proprietors of the small businesses are not using the social media platforms despite the indispensable role of customer relationship management to the competitiveness and eventual survival of the small businesses.  The qualitative study will bridge the gap in information on whether the failure to use the available cost-effective digital channels is attributed to a lack of awareness of use or the potential of the digital communication channels to meet their needs for customer relationship management.

**Problem Statement**

The general problem to be addressed in the qualitative study is the lack of awareness of the proprietors of small businesses on social customer relationship management practices, a finding that was made by Bridge (2017). The lack of awareness prevents them from realizing the potential that using social media platforms to aid in their engagement with their customers would bridge the inadequacy of resources as reported by Bridge (2017). Several scholars have noted the lack of awareness about the use of social media for purposes among the proprietors of small businesses with concern. Bridge (2017) noted that the failure of proprietors of small businesses to perform customer relationship management functions using the social media avenue is reflected not only by the lack of awareness of social media platforms but also by a lack of awareness of how the digital communication channel can be utilized in business communication. Newby et al. (2014) had also reported similar findings when performing an inquiry into the marketing practices that the proprietors of small businesses use. The specific problem to be solved is the lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management can have for their enterprises.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia. A quantitative study performed by Harrigan and Miles (2014) recommended future studies to explore how the use of social media could help the proprietors of small businesses to engage with their customers with a focus on the effect on the ability of the small businesses to

attract and retain more customers. Harrigan and Miles (2014) had recommended the use of

qualitative methodologies in order to gain an in-depth insight into the phenomenon.

The recommendation by Harrigan and Miles (2014) was a major influence on the

qualitative study. The two researchers reported that resources were a significant limiting factor

for customer relationship management in small businesses. The proprietors of the small

businesses often have to prioritize the available resources to the many competing functions.

Often, the allocation of resources towards customer relationship management endeavors is

minimal while in other cases, the allocation of resources is entirely skewed to other business

functions at the expense of customer relationship management. This necessitates a cost-effective

approach through which the proprietors of the small businesses can not only gain insight into

their customers but also engage with them.

The increasing significance of social media for business communication provides a

reprieve for the proprietors of small businesses because, in addition to being cost-effective, many

of the targeted customers also use social media platforms for their personal communication

needs. Therefore, the study aimed to explore whether its use in customer relationship

management enhances the ability of the small businesses to attract and retain customers

compared to those that do not use social customer relationship management.

**Nature of the Study**

The qualitative case study proposed to explore the use of social customer relationship by

the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia using a qualitative methodology.

The choice of the qualitative methodology was made at the expense of a quantitative study for

reasons that will be fructified in the following sections. The research design used in the

qualitative study was the case study design. Some of the other approved methods included the

narrative method, phenomenology, ethnography, and the grounded theory method.  The choice of the case study research design at the expense of the others were fructified in the sections that follow.

        **Discussion of method**.  The qualitative research methodology is a commonly used methodology as argued by Stake (2010).  The decision to use the qualitative methodology for this study was influenced by various factors that are inherent in the title of the study and the aim for which the study is designed.  One of the reasons for which the qualitative research methodology was chosen over the quantitative research methodology is the need for in-depth understanding of the use of social customer relationship among the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  Present perspectives from the review of the literature showed that while the use of social media fits the limited budgets of the small businesses, there is a failure to use them towards customer relationship management goals.  There is a need to understand whether the failure of use is precipitated by the lack of awareness of the use of social media as was suggested by Bridge (2017).  There is also a need to understand whether the noted lack of use of social media by Harrigan and Miles (2014) can be attributed to a lack of awareness of the importance of the customer relationship management function to their businesses.  Finally, it is necessary to determine whether it is because the use of social media does not proffer any benefits towards attracting and retaining customers to the proprietors of small businesses compared to those who do not use social media for the purposes of customer relationship management.

        According to Yin (2009), the qualitative research methodology fits with those purposes because it enables a researcher to perform an in-depth inquiry into the research phenomena, thereby aiding a rich understanding of the factors of the phenomenon through an examination of

real data.  The qualitative research methodology was a fit for the study because it allowed the

researcher to look into the methods of customer relationship management used by the proprietors

of small businesses and determine whether in using social customer relationship management,

the proprietors were more successful compared to their counterparts who did not use social

customer relationship management.  Part of the in-depth understanding of the research

phenomenon in the study is sampling and considering the perspectives of the proprietors of the

small businesses.  Sutton and Austin (2015) argued that unlike quantitative methodologies that

would tell us the number of proprietors using and not using social customer relationship

management, the qualitative research methodology allows the research to sample the feelings

and thoughts of the proprietors regarding social customer relationship management.  The

perspectives of the proprietors can then be used to develop an understanding of why they behave

as they do in the context of social customer relationship management (Adams, Broom, &

Jennaway, 2012).  This is enabled because through the qualitative methodology, the researcher

can select specific data collection methods that allow him to sample the perspectives of the

participants without the inhibition of preconceived notions.

The qualitative research method has been used successfully in studies exploring various

perspectives in marketing and customer relationship management, particularly, in the small

business sector.  The study performed by Bennett (2017) used a qualitative method because the

gist of their topic involved the exploration of the social media strategies utilized by the

proprietors of small restaurants.  Bennett (2017) justified the use of the research method by citing

the importance of in-depth information for the exploration aspect of their topic.  Parker (2014)

who outlined some of the considerations that justify the use of a qualitative design also supported

the choice of method.  Some of the considerations include exploratory elements in the topic,

where the understanding of the business problem does not require testing of hypothesis, where the themes from the study participants are needed to advance knowledge on the business problem, and when large samples may not be available or desired to generate the knowledge required to ventilate the business problem (Parker, 2014). Stebner, Boyer, Baker, and Peterson (2017) also justified their use of a qualitative methodology by citing a need to explore the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of their study population on the use of new media for marketing purposes. These are aspects that are inherent in the business problem to be resolved by the study, hence the appropriateness of the qualitative methodology.

The quantitative research methodology is apt in exploring how the variables, in theory, relate to one another (Creswell, 2014). The relationship between the variables is measured using numerical measures. With the problem to be solved by this study being a lack of awareness of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has on their businesses, the quantitative research methodology would not be appropriate because there is no intent to measure how the variables relate with one another. More importantly, the quantitative research methodology will not help produce in-depth data that is required in exploring general and specific problems. The numerical measures used in the quantitative research methodology are definite and define absolute situations (Creswell, 2014). The data required to explore the general and specific research problems requires the dynamism that can only be attained by gathering the diverse perspectives of the study population, facilitation that the quantitative research methodology cannot provide. For these reasons, the quantitative research methodology was not appropriate for this study.

The mixed methods research methodology was yet another alternative that was considered for use in this study. The mixed methods research methodology combines attributes

from both the qualitative research methodology and the quantitative research methodology. One rationale for choosing the mixed methods research methodology is that it has strengths that can offset the limitations in the individual constituents. Some of the limitations of the quantitative research methodology as a constituent of the mixed methods is that the information gathered is not in-depth. This is a limitation that can be offset by the qualitative aspect of the mixed methods approach (Malina, Nørreklit, & Selto, 2011). Using the mixed methods approach would also allow both depth and breadth while also allowing for triangulation. However, this research methodology was not selected because of its complexity and the fact that it is resource intensive both in terms of financial resources and in terms of time implications. The mixed methods research method was also not appropriate because of the possibility of discrepancies and the fact that the approaches in interpreting the data in the presence of the discrepancies are not clearly understood (Malina et al., 2011).

**Discussion of design**. There are varieties of research designs through which qualitative studies can be achieved. Some of these designs include narrative, ethnography, case studies, phenomenology, and grounded theory. The case study design is the most appropriate research design for the qualitative study. This design requires the involvement of the researcher in the collection of the data required to resolve the research problem. According to Creswell, Hanson, and Clark (2007), the study design enables the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the research problem by posing descriptive questions regarding particular aspects of the researcher problem for which the researcher wants an in-depth insight. This aspect of the case study research design is of interest in the context of the research problem in the qualitative study. This is because as part of a solution to the problem, the researcher needs to understand the use of customer relationship management practices by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern

West Virginia, the impact those practices have on their small enterprises and whether the

proprietors who use the social customer relationship management practices are more successful

in attracting and retaining customers compared to those proprietors of small enterprises who do

not use social customer relationship management.  The case study design was appropriate

because it allows the researcher to explore the use of social customer relationship management

by the small proprietors in Southern West Virginia and the perceived value of those practices to

their small enterprises (Bridge, 2017).  The case study design allows the researcher to pose the

descriptive questions directly to the participants and also enables him to determine the desired

depth of insight.  Using methods such as semi-structured interviews, the researcher can pose

further probative questions to elicit even more detailed responses from the participants (Bridge,

2017).

Even though the case study design was selected as the most appropriate for this

qualitative study, its selection benefited from a consideration of the other research designs.

Ethnography entails the study of a culture in its entirety (Whitehill, 2007).  The culture in this

context need not be limited to a group of people; it can also include corporate cultures within an

organization and the interaction between the people in the organization.  The reason why

ethnography was not used as the design for the qualitative study is that while it could allow the

researcher to observe and interview the participants to determine the value of social customer

relationship management practices on their small businesses, it only addresses part of the

research problem.

The grounded theory was also considered as a potential research design for the qualitative

study.  According to Reiter, Stewart, and Bruce (2011), the grounded theory is perfect for the

studies where the researcher is interested in generating new theories from the information

collected from the study population.  This purpose was not encapsulated in the aim of the qualitative study.  The grounded theory does not fit for this study because the interest of the researcher is in the experiences of the proprietors of small businesses with regards to the use of social customer relationship management and the impact it has on their businesses and not in developing new theories.  Consequently, the grounded theory was rejected as a research design. Phenomenology as a research design was interesting because according to Creswell et al. (2007), the design is interested in the experiences people have over a specific phenomenon.  Even so, the phenomenological research design was rejected because it focuses more on human experiences, the meanings they derive from the phenomenon under study, and their reflections over their experiences with the phenomenon (Reiter et al., 2011).  This was only part of what the qualitative study aimed to establish the use of social customer relationship by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.

An alternative research design for the qualitative research was the narrative design. Creswell et al. (2007) argued that the research design explores the issues surrounding a research problem in chronological order by posing story-based questions to the participants sampled from the study population.  The researcher retells the story relating to the research problem in order to cover all the life experiences of the study population over the time span in the study.  This research design was inappropriate for the qualitative study because the researcher was not interested in the life experiences of the proprietors of the small businesses but rather, their experiences with using social customer relationship management and more specifically, the impact the new media had on the success of the small enterprises (Bridge, 2017).  For this reason, the narrative researcher design was found inappropriate for the qualitative research and therefore, rejected as the research design.

The discussion above detailed review of the potential research designs for the qualitative study. The discussion showed that the case study design was the most appropriate because it resonated with the aims of the study and provided the researcher with the right approach to collecting the requisite data for resolving the research problem (Bridge, 2017). Consequently, the qualitative study used a case study research design. The researcher used semi-structured interview schedules to collect information from the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia. The semi-structured interview schedules were appropriate for the selected research design and methodology and for the purposes of the study because they allowed the researcher to probe further when he is convinced based on his professional and objective opinion that more information was required to illuminate the researcher phenomenon even further (Bridge, 2017). The researcher was able to exhaustively collect all the information that was indispensable in understanding the use of social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia and the perceived benefits on their small enterprises.

**Summary of the nature of the study**. The study used a qualitative methodology and a case study research design. The qualitative methodology was appropriate over the quantitative methodology because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the manner in which the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia used social media for customer relationship management (Yin, 2009). The qualitative methodology has also been employed successfully in past studies exploring different subject areas in the field of marketing such as those performed by Parker (2014) and Bennett (2017). The case study design was chosen over other relevant designs such as narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory because the design facilitates need for an in-depth understanding of the study

phenomenon while also allowing the researcher to sample the perceived value of the use of social media for customer relationship management purposes from the perspective of the proprietors of the small businesses (Creswell et al., 2007).

**Research Questions**

The following are the research questions that guided this qualitative study.

RQ1: Are the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has for their enterprises? The following are more specific questions to help the researcher attain the aim of the qualitative study.

RQ1a: What is the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management?

RQ1b: What is the influence of resources on the use or failure to use social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia?

RQ1c: What are the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management?

RQ1d: What effect does the use of social customer relationship management have on customer engagement and loyalty?

RQ1e: How different is the ability of the small businesses that use social customer relationship management in attracting and retaining customers different from that of small businesses that do not use social customer relationship management in Southern West Virginia?

The research questions listed above helped in the formulation of the data collection tool to sample the perspectives of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia. The

constructs contained in the research questions were central to answering the overarching question and fulfilling the aim outlined in the purpose statement of the qualitative study.

**Conceptual Framework**

The two theories that guide the qualitative study are the agency theory and the resource-based view of the firm (Bridge, 2017).  The two theories play an important role in the study by offering a basis on which the research phenomenon can be understood.  The two theories also help the understanding of the different facts that affect the noted trends in social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  Finally, the two theories will help ventilate on the benefits the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia draw from using social customer relationship management.

**Discussion of the agency theory**.  The agency theory was chosen for the qualitative study because it offers an explanation on the interests that shareholders and managers hold in a firm and the need for the businesses to fulfill the interests (Bridge, 2017).  An understanding of the significance of the theory to the qualitative study benefits from a backdrop of the operational definition of small businesses as used in this study.  The scope ranges from the operators of the small shops to companies employing less than a hundred people.  The operational definition of small businesses is important because the owners of some of the relevant businesses might rely on managers to maintain the daily operations of the businesses.

Malmir, Shirvani, Rashidpour, and Soltani (2014) also argued for the possibility of a principal-agent relationship in the event some of the small companies falling under the inclusion criteria are publicly traded.  In this context, the agency theory is beneficial because it explains the interests of both the proprietors of the small businesses and the agents who are contracted to manage the businesses and how the interests affect their relationship.

The agency theory has provided an overarching framework for numerous studies whose aim was to explore how businesses benefit from customer loyalty.  Tan and Lee (2015) used the agency theory to analyze customers and businesses and explore the unique attributes of the customers and the business that inspire the customers to remain loyal.  The researchers emphasized the importance and the role of agency theory when the goals of the study were to explore the interests of both the customers and the businesses, the risks to which both parties are exposed, how the customers use the information available to them, and how these factors work in concert to influence the development of loyalty by the customer.

Baird and Parasnis (2011) also used the agency theory in their study where they explored the adaptation of traditional customer relationship management programs to enable the use of social media platforms for increased customer engagement.  The use of the theory helped the researchers find a perception gap that is characterized by antagonism between what the companies offer the customers through the social media platforms and what the customers are looking for from the businesses from which they purchase their wares and services.

According to Bridge (2017), the agency theory benefits the qualitative study because it helps the proprietors collect information about the customer that can be used to build trust and loyalty while also enabling the agents managing their enterprises to anticipate the needs of the customers.  This argument was also made by Zander and Zander (2005) who argued that by collecting this information, the proprietors of the small businesses or the agents they contracted to manage the enterprises could forge a relationship with their customers and also act in their best interest as a prerequisite for developing trust and loyalty.

The agency theory helped the researcher meet the objectives of the qualitative study in a variety of ways.  Firstly, the theory will offer insights on how the proprietors of the small

businesses or the agents tasked with the management of the enterprises can use social media in order to forge and manage relationships with their customers (Bridge, 2017). Secondly, the theory helped towards the achievement of the objectives of the qualitative study by aiding in collecting information on whether the lack of awareness of the proprietors of the small businesses on the use of the digital communication channels to engage with their customers as reported in the background and problem statement sections significantly affects their loyalty to the businesses.

Finally, the theory will help the researcher explore the disparity in perception that was noted by Baird and Paranis (2011) regarding the expectations of the customers and the perception of the businesses regarding what the customers expect. The researchers had found that what the businesses believed and provided to the customers was significantly different from what the customers expected.

**Discussion of the resource-based view of the firm**. This is the second theory on which the qualitative study is based. The theory proposes the use of resources and capabilities within a firm as a vantage point from which the successes and failures of the said firm can be assessed. The theory posits that whether or not a firm achieves its goals is influenced by the resources and competencies to which it has access (Barney, 1991). The theory also holds that some of the disparities that are witnessed between two businesses in the same industry are attributed to the unequal ability of the businesses to access the essential resources and competencies as well as their ability to utilize the resources and competencies towards the achievement of the established goals (Barney, 1991).

Many studies have benefited from using the resource-based view of the firm to guide their inquiry. One of the studies related to customer relationship management is the one

performed by Garrido-Moreno, Lockett, and Garcia-Morales (2014).  The researchers aimed to

determine the benefits that customers and businesses can draw from the use of different

technological factors in customer relationship management.  The resource-based view of the firm

was beneficial to their study because two of the main domains explored in the study included the

capabilities and resources to which the firms had access (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2014).

The use of the theory will aid significantly in the generation of knowledge.  For instance,

Garrido-Moreno et al. (2014) found that even when a firm had sufficient access to resources, the

application of the technological factors towards customer relationship management initiatives

would not generate the desired effect if the firm lacked the capabilities and competencies needed

to leverage the resources and technological factors.

The background section and the problem statement in the qualitative study highlighted

the inadequacy of resources as one of the factors that predict the failure to invest in customer

relationship management infrastructure (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).  Considering this background,

the resource-based view of the firm as a theory is beneficial to this study because it helps address

this key area in the study.  According to Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey (1998), the use of social

media platforms can help the proprietors of small businesses to meet the needs for which

financial resources are an impeding factor because social media allows them to engage with their

customers at a fraction of the resources they would have required if they were to invest in the

mainstream infrastructure for customer relationship management.

According to Bridge (2017), the resource-based view of the firm is beneficial to this

study because it addresses the availability of marketing resources.  Social media is relatively

inexpensive in terms of the initial investments as well as the recurrent costs.  Additionally, it

requires the use of a minimal amount of time compared to the mainstream customer relationship

management infrastructure.  The use of the resources available on many social media platforms will help the proprietors of the small businesses draw the benefits of engaging with their customers.  The use of this theory helps the researcher understand whether the failure of use that was noted in the background section is attributed to a lack of resources or capabilities and competencies.

The other aspect of the resource-based view of the firm that is of interest to the qualitative study is its influence on the recommendations to be made.  After understanding whether the businesses that use social customer relationship management are more successful than their counterparts who do not use social customer relationship management, the researcher generated recommendations as part of the report that was shared with the stakeholders and more specifically, the participants from whom the data were collected.  The theory helped the researcher determine the resources on which the proprietors of small businesses should focus. Jurevicious (2013) discussed the concepts of tangible and intangible resources under the resource-based view of the firm.  The discussion also focused on the resources that offer the small businesses a competitive advantage that they can use to edge their competitors.

Of interest were the VRIO attributes in the resources and the need to determine whether the attributes are common in the tangible or intangible resources related to social customer relationship management.  In this context, the tangible resources include the computers, the infrastructure required for an internet connection and any other physical facilities and utilities required.  The intangible resources are in the form of soft resources and include the skills and capabilities that the proprietors of the small businesses require to use social media platforms for customer relationship management purposes.

According to Jurevicious (2013), the intangible resources have the VRIO attributes and therefore, are more likely to give the proprietors a competitive advantage. More specifically, Jurevicious (2013) argued that while the tangible resources are necessary for social customer relationship management, it is the capabilities and competencies of the proprietors of the small businesses or the agents they have contracted to manage the enterprises that will predict a competitive advantage. While the researcher was keen to see whether this theme arose from the data collected, the resource-based view of the firm offered insight on what the researcher might have expected. The two theories helped explain the concepts and trends in information relating to the qualitative study. Their use helped illuminate some of the issues that were highlighted in the background sections as well as the problem statement section. Their contribution was significant to ensure the researcher met the research objectives.

**Discussion of relationships between concepts**. The concepts that characterize the conceptual framework are derived from the agency theory and the resource-based view of the firm as the two theories on which this qualitative study is based. The proprietors might opt for an agent-principal relationship, especially when they are not able to preside over the daily operations of their small businesses. The agency theory outlines the interests of both the agents and the principals. Its application in the context of this qualitative study helps in understanding how the interests of the principals and agents, any differences notwithstanding, can be harnessed to enhance customer experience, customer loyalty and success for the small businesses (Bridge, 2017). The resource-based view of the firm provides insights into the role of resources in harnessing the interests of the principal and/or agent towards enhancing engagement with customers. The theory highlights the resources, competencies, and capabilities within the small businesses as significant influencers of the success experienced in businesses, big or small. The

theory highlights the importance of both tangible and intangible resources for small businesses (Barney, 1991). Principals and agents should focus on developing intangible resources because unique attributes such as the quality of being rare and inimitable give small businesses a competitive advantage (Jurevicious, 2013). This is one thing that this qualitative study will seek to establish from the proprietors of the small businesses.

**Summary of the conceptual framework**. The conceptual framework on which this qualitative study was based comprised of the agency theory and the resource-based view of the firm. The agency theory also offered insights on the role of agents in cultivating customer loyalty by collecting information that enables the small businesses to anticipate the needs of their customers. As part of the conceptual framework, the agency theory also offered insights on the use of social media by the agents or owners of the small businesses in order to create and sustain mutually beneficial relationships with their customers. The agency theory will help the researcher in exploring the disparities that were noted by Baird and Paranis (2011) regarding what the proprietors believe the consumers want and what the consumers actually want.

The resource-based view of the firm contributes to this qualitative study both individually and in contextualizing the knowledge gained through the agency theory. The resource-based view of the firm posited that the success or lack thereof in business is influenced by the capabilities and resources to which a particular business has access. This theory is relevant for this qualitative study, especially considering the significance of the resource-context in which the small businesses operate as noted by Harrigan and Miles (2014). The theory underscores the importance of intangible resources in creating a competitive advantage for small businesses. The competence to use social media for the purposes of customer relationship management is one of

the intangible resources that small businesses can use to compete favorably with larger competitors.

**Definition of Terms**

*Customer engagement:* customer engagement to the correspondence between the small businesses and their customers through various online and offline communication channels with the aim of strengthening relationships (Goyal & Srivastava, 2015).

*Customer experience:* this is the product of the ongoing engagement between the proprietors of the small businesses or the agents employed by the proprietors and the customers over the period during which the relationship is sustained. The experience can either be negative or positive depending on the nature of the engagement (Tynan, McKechnie, & Hartley, 2014).

*Customer relationship management:* this term describes all the practices, technologies, and approaches that small businesses use in the analysis and management of their interactions with their customers and the data they collected from and about the customers with the aim improving customer experience as well as strengthening the relationships (Plouffe, Williams, & Leigh, 2004).

*Online communities:* these are aggregations of people on the internet who share common characteristics such as interests and whose interaction are supported or enabled partially by technology and moderated by commonly agreed norms (Porter & Donthu, 2008).

*Proprietors:* this term describes the owners of small businesses.

*Small businesses:* this term describes income generating firms that employ a minimum of one hundred salaried employees and a maximum of five hundred salaried employees (Small Business Administration, 2016). This operational definition of the term small businesses will be used as part of the inclusion and exclusion criteria when selecting the participants of this

qualitative study. However, the study will consider the business that have less than one hundred employees because of the unavailability of businesses that are large enough to employ a minimum of one hundred people.

*Social customer relationship management:* this term describes the use of social media as the digital communication channel through which the small businesses collect customer data as well as engage with their customers with the aim of enhancing the customer experience as well strengthening relationships with the customers (Jacewicz & Cho, 2015).

*Social media platforms:* these are the accounts on various social media sites through which the small businesses can maintain an online presence using which they can communicate and engage with their customers (Bridge, 2017).

**Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations**

This qualitative study made several assumptions. These assumptions were necessary because the research did not have the absolute information about the proprietors of small businesses and the influences of the industries in which they operated. The assumptions allowed the researcher to hold some of the unknowns constant while performing the study for consistency. In addition to the influence of the assumptions, this qualitative study was also limited by some limitations. These are factors that had a limiting effect and for which the researcher did not have adequate controls. The final influence was that of deliminations. While the researcher wanted to explore the research problem in its entirety, the effect of the limitations and other factors necessitated a defined scope. This section outlines the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations that applied to this qualitative study and their influence on the expected findings.

**Assumptions**.  This qualitative study assumed that the proprietors of the small businesses or the agents they might have contracted to run the businesses on their behalf have the skills to use social media.  The indicator on which the researcher will rely to determine the possession of the skills to use social media is the participation in at least two social media sites (Bridge, 2017). The risk for the study if this assumption is proved to be false is that if the researcher interviews the agents rather than the manager, there is a likelihood that the finding will be skewed towards a prevalent lack of awareness.  The contingency to mitigate this risk is that in addition the operation of two social media accounts in different platforms, the researcher also sought to interview the person who was responsible for marketing communications if the agents were not directly involved in the affairs of customer relationship management.

The study assumes that the proprietors of or agents managing the small businesses that maintain and operate at least two social media sites possess the basic knowledge that they require to utilize the social media platforms for customer relationship management purposes (Bridge, 2017).  The scope of this assumption is only limited to the use of social media sites and does not extend to proper use.  The risk for the study in the event that this assumption is proved to be false is that any claims that the use of social customer relationship management practices does not yield any benefit the small businesses may be due to the knowledge of how to use social media sites but not for the purposes of social customer relationship management.  The researcher mitigated this risk by determining whether the proprietors used their social media accounts specifically for social customer relationship management practices as part of the inclusion criteria.  This qualitative study explored the proper use of social media platforms for customer relationship management through the interview of the proprietors as part of the data collection exercise (Bridge, 2017).  As Bridge (2017) argued, this assumption is important to this

qualitative study because obtaining information from the owners of small businesses who do not have the basic knowledge of how to use social media platforms for customer relationship management purposes will not benefit the research questions.

This qualitative study also assumed that the proprietors of the small businesses had implemented an ongoing strategy towards engagement with their customers. The risk for the study if this assumption is proved to be false is that the lack of a customer engagement strategy does not provide a basis on which social media as a tool for social customer relationship management. Bridge (2017) argued that in implementing this strategy, the small businesses should do more than posting random information in their social media platforms and instead seek to engage with their customers actively in order to gain the insights that they can use to enhance the customer experience. The researcher mitigated this risk by ensuring that the participants selected to participate in the study were the proprietors or agents of small businesses that in addition to using social customer relationship management, also had a well-defined customer engagement strategy.

**Limitations**. The limitation of this qualitative study is that the small businesses in Southern West Virginia, the study location, do not comprise all the industries in which small businesses operate (Bridge, 2017). In addition, this qualitative study only looked at small businesses in a small demographic and geographic area. This limitation had implications on the comprehensiveness of the information collected. Another limitation of this study was the findings of the study may not have been generalizable beyond the sample population that were studied.

**Delimitations**. The focus of this qualitative study was the awareness of the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia on the potential that the use of social customer

relationship management had for businesses. The study sought to determine the level of awareness of the proprietors of small businesses on the use and potential of social customer relationship management. As a possible explanation for the low use of social customer relationship management noted by Harrigan and Miles (2014), this qualitative study also explored the influence of resources on the use of social customer relationship management. This qualitative study also explored the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia on the use of social customer relationship management, the influence it had on customer engagement, and loyalty. The three main components of this strategy on which this qualitative study focuses include technology, relationships and the organizational culture (Bridge, 2017). This qualitative study did not focus on the traditional customer relationship management programs that Harrigan and Miles (2014) found to be economically inaccessible for the small businesses because of the high capital costs as well as the time required in the collection and analysis of customer data.

**Significance of the Study**

The qualitative study is significant because it contributes to the existing knowledge by addressing some of the gaps that have been noted by Harrigan and Miles (2014) and Bridge (2018) such as the failure to use social media for customer relationship management even when it is cost-effective. The study is also significant because it incorporates Biblical teachings such as the use of talents in others and good stewardship. The qualitative study is also significant because it advances knowledge in the cognate field of marketing.

**Reduction of gaps**. The review of existing literature highlighted several gaps with regards to the use of social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses as operationally defined in this qualitative study. The gaps include the difference

between theory and practices in social customer relationship management by small enterprises, the reasons why the small businesses have not adopted social customer relationship extensively despite its cost-effectiveness and relevance as demonstrated in studies by Baird and Parasnis (2011), Gholston et al. (2016), and Bridge (2017).

One of the gaps in information is whether the practices of the proprietors of small businesses with regard to social customer relationship management are as indicated in the literature. Bridge (2017) reported there was a failure by the proprietors of small businesses to use social media platforms as part of the customer relationship management practices despite the comparatively small expense incurred and in the backdrop of inadequate resources to invest in the professional tools for customer relationship management. Similar findings were made by Newby et al. (2014). This qualitative study determined whether this was the case in West Virginia, specifically Southern West Virginia, by determining whether the proprietors of the small businesses there were aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management could have on their enterprises.

There is also the issue of why the proprietors of small businesses are not using social media platforms for their customer relationship management needs even when researchers such as Parry et al. (2012) have recommended its use and others such as Gholston et al. (2016) and Melewar and Smith (2003) have argued for its significance in business communication. The application of the conceptual framework, especially the resource-based view of the firm, gave explanatory reasons for the limited use of social customer relationship management in small businesses.

One of the probable reasons for the lack of widespread use social customer relationship management was a lack of awareness on the potential of using social media platforms for the

purposes of customer relationship management, an unavailability of both the tangible and intangible resources they require to implement social customer relationship management, an unwillingness of the proprietors of the small businesses to use the digital communication technology, and a perceived inappropriateness of social media for business communication. This qualitative study attempted to determine the aptness of the explanations above while probing the participants for more reasons for the identified practices, and by that, fill the gap in information that was identified by Bridge (2017).

There are different benefits that the proprietors of small businesses can gain by using social media for their customer relationship management needs. Harrigan and Miles (2014) argued that social media platforms bridge the gap created by an inadequacy of resources. The researcher will determine whether the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia enjoy these benefits as described by Bridge (2017).

There is a need to compare what is stated in theory against what occurs in practice in order to understand the extent of use of social customer relationship management and why any disparities that may exist between theory and practices do. This knowledge would also be used to make recommendations on how the small businesses can benefit from social media if it emanates from the data that the disparities between theory and practices are attributed to the practices of the business as was reported by Bridge (2017)

Authors such as Bridge (2018) and Harrigan and Miles (2014) cited an inadequacy of resources as one of the impediments to customer relationship management by the proprietors of the small businesses. Soderlund (2015) argued without any specificity that the failure to use social media for various activities that are related to marketing is attributed to the inadequacy of resources. Knowledge from the resource-based view of the firm, one of the two theories on

which the qualitative study is based, identified tangible and intangible resources as the two types

that affect the success in an organization (Jurevicious, 2013). Since both types of resources are

relevant for social customer relationship management in the context of the small businesses, it is

necessary to determine whether the inadequacy of resources identified by Soderlund (2015)

relates to the tangible or intangible resources. By filling this gap in information, the researcher

will contribute to the existing knowledge by specifying whether it is the skills and expertise for

the use of social media that the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia lack or

whether it is the hardware and utilities that serve as the impediments.

**Implications for Biblical integration**. The qualitative study was also significant

because it entrenches Biblical teachings such as stewardship, the importance of the internal

environment and the use of available resources into the area of study. Both the agency theory

and the resource-based view of the firm support the qualitative study. With the focus on

competitive advantages, the resource-based view of the firm recommends that organizations

should focus on the internal environment. This is because it is only in this environment where

they have control and influence. Different Christian and Biblical teachings illustrate the

significance of the internal environments in business as a place where they can generate a

competitive advantage over their competitors.

As Keller and Alsdorf (2012) wrote,

The Spirit does not make us wise in any magical kind of way, giving us little nudges and

insider tips to help us always choose the best stock to invest in. Rather he makes Jesus

Christ a living, bright reality, transforming our character, giving us new inner poise,

clarity, humility, boldness, contentment, and courage. All of this leads to increasing

wisdom and to better and better decisions. (p. 212)

This excerpt personifies the importance of the internal environment in Christian teaching. Keller and Alsdorf (2012) underscored the significance of internal resources for both man and businesses. Some of the internal resources include wisdom, commitment, courage, clarity of thought, and inner poise that God bestows upon his followers. These resources have the quality of rareness, one of the attributes of VRIO resources as argued by Jurevicious (2013). The rarity in the internal resources outlined above is what contributes to the competitive advantage as recommended by the resource-based view of the firm, one of the theories on which the qualitative study is based.

The parable of servants as written in the Bible offers other Christian teachings (Matthew 25: 14-30, English Standard Version). When Jesus was explaining this parable and its meaning to his followers, he narrated what happened to the servant who hid the talent he was given instead of committing it to productive use. While the talent remained secured safely, God was not pleased with the fact that he was a bad steward of the resource to which he was assigned. He confiscated the talent and gave it to the servant whose stewardship had led to a productive outcome. The lessons from this parable show that when God assigns us resources, his intention is for us to be stewards who generate an outcome of value that not only benefits us but more of his creation as argued by Keller (2010). Burkett (2008) advanced this argument by proposing that the agents with whom proprietors entrust their businesses, as well as the actual proprietors, have an obligation from God to grow and use their talents so they can be of benefit to not only the consumers but also the owners of the businesses in the case of a principal-agent relationship.

Bridge (2017) highlighted a lack of awareness by the proprietors on the use of social media as well as the potential of social media for customer engagement. There are Biblical

teachings that provide solutions that the proprietors of the businesses who lack the aforesaid skills. One of the teachings as written in the Bible,

> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching. (Romans 12:4-7. English Standard Version)

This verse offers a solution in cases where the proprietors of small businesses do not have the skills needed to use social media for customer relationship management purposes. The verse says that God has bestowed different gifts and talents to different people. Arguably, the gifts and talents that the proprietors of the small businesses do not have can be found by hiring people who have them. This verse has an implication for the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia and the qualitative study. Even if the proprietors may not have the skills necessary to perform social customer relationship management, their businesses can still benefit from the potential for social media in customer relationship management by hiring people who are conversant with its use.

**Relationship to field of study**. This qualitative study is also significant in that it advances knowledge in the cognate field of marketing. According to Greenberg (2008), social customer relationship management constitutes the reaction of a business to the participation of their consumers. The use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management acknowledges the need for businesses to collaborate with their consumers. Social media is being used in different marketing functions such as customer relationship management as recognition of the need to reach to consumers irrespective of their locations (Greenberg, 2008; Bridge,

2017).  Through social media, businesses can tailor messages that are specific to the needs and preferences of consumers.  Social media also allows businesses to target the individual customers by interacting with them, gathering feedback and insight, and using the feedback to model the business processes to meet the needs of the customers (Tuleu, 2015).

This qualitative study is also significant because it proposes the use of the disruptive innovation that has revolutionized practices in the business environment and the cognate field of marketing (McDonald & Kolsaker, 2014).  Consequently, businesses in the contemporary business environment have many more uses for different social media platforms.  The presence of enabling infrastructure such as internet penetration has also facilitated the increased use of social media for business purposes (Stelzner, 2016).  The relative affordability of social media allows the proprietors of small businesses to utilize these platforms, especially since these enterprises have limited resources and competing priorities (Bridge, 2017).  Baumeister (2002) argued that the proprietors of small businesses face situations where they must prioritize the allocation of the limited resources available to the business.  Insights gained from an industry workshop on the use of decision support systems in businesses showed that while the customer relationship management software was very effective in large organizations when implemented and managed well, they were too expensive for adoption by small businesses (Dargam et al., 2012).  This problem was also reflected in the work done by Zhou, Xiao, Liu, and Ai (2013). The scholars found that limitations in resources are a significant problem for the proprietors of small businesses; a problem that was significant enough to deter them from the use of the software and analytical methods that are available in mainstream customer relationship management practices.

This qualitative study is also significant because customer relationship management as a business practice is indispensable in the cognate field of marketing (Zamil, 2011; Bridge, 2017). According to Zamil (2011), the use of social media in this way reflects the use of innovative technology in the field of marketing. The conventional methods of customer relationship management involve the use of software that is uniquely designed to organize, automate, collect information, and synchronize data from different activities from various departments in an organization. Zamil (2011) further argued that businesses employed this customer relationship management strategy in order to gain insights that can be used to target and position their brands and products in the minds of their consumers. The use of social media also allows proprietors who cannot afford the conventional tools to collect information from their consumers as well as interact with them whether for technical and customer support or marketing purposes.

This qualitative study is significant because it explores many concepts that are relevant to the cognate field of marketing. One of the concepts is customer relationship management, a strategy that Payne and Frow (2006) saw as a marketing strategy aimed at enabling a better performance through improved intangible benefits such as customer satisfaction, a higher perception of quality of service, and customer engagement. According to Zamil (2011), the concept of customer relationship management enhances the marketing function within an organization primarily due to the higher probability that satisfied customers return and also refer the brand or product to their colleagues.

The concept of customer relationship management also augments the marketing function by addressing the difference in perception between what the small businesses know of their customers and their expectations and what the customers expect from the businesses, a difference that was highlighted by Baird and Paranis (2011) through the use of the agency theory. Filling

this difference in perception will help small businesses provide products and services that are responsive to the dynamic expectations of the customers.  Filling this difference in perception also will also help the small businesses segment and target their customers even more appropriately while also using the most preferred communication channels to target their consumers (Baird & Paranis, 2011).  This knowledge will also benefit the field of marketing.

**Summary of the significance of the study**.  This qualitative study is significant because it provides the missing information on why there is low utilization of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses as found by Harrigan and Miles (2014) even when it is a cost-effective alternative to the resource-intensive mainstream software.  This qualitative study is also significant because it incorporates Biblical teachings such as good stewardship and the use and management of talents in the practice of marketing.  Finally, this qualitative study is significant because it advances knowledge in the cognate field of marketing.

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

The general problem to be addressed in the qualitative study is the lack of awareness of the proprietors of small businesses on social customer relationship management practices, a finding that was made by Bridge (2017).  The specific problem to be solved is the lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management can have for their enterprises.  The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia.

The research traced the concept of social customer relationship management to its precursor, customer relationship management.  The research also examined the social customer

relationship management practices and how they are incorporated into the marketing strategies of small businesses in order to deliver more value to both the business and the customer. The research also acknowledged that for all the success of social customer relationship management as an approach to encouraging customer engagement, it is also subject to failures. In this respect, the research includes failures of both social customer relationship management and its predecessors. Finally, the literature review includes discussion on the social customer relationship management formula that small businesses can implement in their enterprises to further promote economic growth and enhanced consumer loyalty.

**Customer relationship management**. Social customer relationship management is a cost-effective and convenient use of social media platforms in customer engagement with the aim of enhancing relationships and customer experience (Stelzner, 2012). The aspect of convenience is brought about by the fact that many of the customers targeted by small businesses use social media sites for their communication needs (Maecker, Barrot, & Becker, 2016). Social media is now a significance digital communication channel, particularly due to the proliferation of the internet and internet-enabled devices (Rosman & Stuhura, 2013). Consequently, more people communicate with their peers over social media sites. Businesses can now exploit the fact that many of the customers whom they target with their products use these digital communication channels. Businesses can communicate their brand values and image, and the products and services they offer to their customers through these digital communication channels (Gholston et al., 2016). The aspect of cost-effectiveness is brought about by the fact that the costs involved in setting up the infrastructure for social customer relationship management are comparatively smaller compared to the costs required for investing in the mainstream software and tools for customer relationship management (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

Communicating actively with the customers via the social media platforms allows the customer to develop an attachment for the small business that is characterized by increased awareness, attention as well as feedback (Mende, Bolton, & Bitner, 2013). One of the important elements of the attachment that are of benefit to the small businesses in the development of trust. A study performed by Calefato, Lanubile, and Novielli (2014) reported that social media significantly affected the cognitive trust of customers. When prompted for their perception of the predictability and competence of a company, 45% of the respondents alluded to information they gleaned on the social media accounts of the companies. Calefato et al. (2014) also reported that customers were more attracted to companies who maintained an active presence on social media sites. Communicating with customers over social media sites also enables small businesses to get feedback from their customers on various aspects that relate to the businesses. Some of these aspects could include the quality of the product and services on offer, concerns, compliments, and complains (Bridge, 2017). The small businesses can then use this feedback to institute improvements in their business model or delivery.

A strong brand is associated with an increase in sales as well as an increase in the value of the customer throughout the span of the relationship (Dahlgren, 2011). A strong brand communicates its values to its customers through the most appropriate channels so as to increase brand awareness (Bridge, 2017). By communicating its brand values, a business can increase product knowledge among its target customers. Product knowledge is an important factor in driving sales leadership. Businesses can use social customer relationship to increase the awareness of the brand by the target audience. Businesses can also use social customer relationship management to remedy any concerns that the customers might have with either the brand or the products on offer (Bridge, 2017). The small businesses can solicit for feedback

from their target customers in order to learn the areas in their business model, brand values or products and services where improvements are needed.  The knowledge gained from these practices and the corrective actions instituted as a result contribute to enhancing the strength of the brand, perceived awareness and by extension, increased sales (Bridge, 2017).

Social customer relationship allows the proprietors of small businesses to develop new markets for their wares and services (Warfield, 2009).  Users of different social media platforms inadvertently share information about their individual lives that can be used for targeting purposes.  Bridge (2017) argued that the proprietors of small businesses can use this information to appeal to new customers in new markets as well as in the existing markets.  The information is also useful in consumer-brand identification as a prerequisite for the identification of new opportunities within the existing market (Elbedweihy, Jayawardhena, Elsharnouby, & Elsharnouby, 2016).  The proprietors of the small businesses can learn about the unmet needs in existing and new markets from the feedback given by the customers over the social media platforms.  This information can help the proprietors of small businesses identify new opportunities to grow their brand.  It can also help the proprietors of small businesses to identify new opportunities to introduce new products and services into their existing product lines (Bridge, 2017).

Small businesses can perform better than their competitors by forging and sustaining strong relationships with the customers and offering then individualized attention through social customer relationship management (Haumann, Quaiser, Wieseke, & Rese, 2014).  Customers feel valued when they are given individualized attention as opposed to when they are addressed as part of a group (Gupta, 2007).  The small businesses could be offering products or a service to their customers.  Gupta (2007) argued that individualized attention is important for businesses

offering services or products.  The individualized attention is not limited to communicating over

social media platforms.  It also involves offering an immediate product or technical support,

reducing the waiting time for customers who need some issues or concerns assuaged, the

promptness with which the businesses offer feedback or respond to questions and general

responsiveness of the businesses to any prompts from the customers (Gupta, 2007).  Social

media platforms offer a platform through which the proprietors of the small businesses can offer

this individualized attention to the customers.  Haumann et al. (2014) argued that the

individualized help the customers identify with the businesses because they show a deliberate

concern for their needs and that the management of the businesses shows genuine attempts to

address them.  Additionally, the individualized attention helps the customers express their ideas,

something that is beneficial for the small businesses by way of offering them feedback and

knowledge on areas where improvements are due (Haumann et al., 2014).

Adopting social customer relationship management helps overcome the resource

constraints that characterize the resource context in which the small businesses operate (Bridge,

2017).  The resource context in which the small businesses operate is one of the considerations

for this qualitative proposal.  The resources available to the proprietors of the small businesses

are limited in the backdrop of competing priorities such as maintaining payrolls, inventories, and

paying for utilities and other operational aspects that are needed to keep the businesses running

(Bridge, 2017).  Even more impending is the price tag with which the mainstream software for

customer relationship management comes as found by Harrigan and Miles (2014).  The

inadequate resources to purchase the mainstream customer relationship management software,

tools and the other associated infrastructure prevents the small businesses from benefiting from

the use of decision support systems, tools that have been shown through industry evidence to be

beneficial to large organizations (Dargam et al., 2012). Social customer relationship management is beneficial because it helps the proprietors of the small businesses maneuver the limited coffers by using the digital communication channels that are cost-effective (Bridge, 2017). The infrastructure required for social customer relationship management is also cost-effective (Rosman & Stuhura, 2013). The proliferation of the internet coupled with its comparative affordability enables the small businesses to maintain a consistent online presence and communicate with its customers (Rosman & Stuhura, 2013). Even with limited resources, small businesses can engage in customer relationship management effectively using social media platforms (Bridge, 2017).

Small businesses can mobilize their customers to take part in value creation through the use of social media (Bradley & McDonald, 2011). A sustainable value in a business is one that is co-created by the business in conjunction with its customers (Biggemann, Williams, & Kro, 2014). Co-creation involves the involvement of the customers in the activities of the business aimed at creating value. Social media allows businesses to co-create value with their customers by engaging with their customers actively (Agnihotri, Kothandaraman, Kashyap, & Singh, 2012). The social media framework that small businesses use to guide their social customer relationship management activities should benefit from well-defined goals, the exchange of information with their customers and competitor analysis, particularly with regard to their use of social media. This framework will allow the small businesses to determine the approaches through which they will measure the effectiveness of the social customer relationship management efforts and the value that they co-create with their customers (Agnihotri et al., 2012).

The customer segments that a small business is targeting, the messages to be communicated, and the control the proprietors want over the messages broadcasted influence the selection of social media platforms for use in social customer relationship management (Ramsey, 2010). There are different social media platforms from which the businesses can choose to create accounts through which they can engage with their customers as part of the social customer relationship management practices. Some of these include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WeChat, and Pinterest among others (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). While there is a convergence of commonalities between the different social media platforms, there are unique characteristics in each of these sites that attracting a certain type of user (Bridge, 2017). Communication styles used in the different social media platforms differ from one site to another. Consequently, small businesses using social customer relationship management cannot adopt one approach to be used for all the sites in which they have accounts. Ramsey (2010) argued that businesses should use different content and communication styles for different social media sites as is appropriate to enhance the effectiveness of the social customer relationship management practices. Rather than just list information, global brands that have successfully used social customer relationship management post a specific message that is aimed at targeting a specific niche in the market (Bridge, 2017). Specific targeting ensures that social customer relationship management efforts are successful in forging relationships with targeted customers.

The proprietors of small businesses need knowledge on the purposes for which their customers use social media sites to enhance the effectiveness of the social customer relationship strategy in the creation of value (Bradley & McDonald, 2011). There are different reasons for which users use social media accounts. The knowledge of these reasons is important the small businesses are going to deliver value using social customer relationship management (Bradley &

McDonald, 2011).  This knowledge would facilitate value exchange with the targeted consumers where the proprietors of the small businesses do not see social media sites as mere digital communication channels but as channels through which they can strengthen their relationship with customers as well as business communication (Bridge, 2017).  As Quinton (2013) argued, social media sites can also serve as research tools that the proprietors of the small business can use to gather insights from the consumers on how to improve their communication strategies for the benefit of both the business and the customers.  The engagement with the customers through social media sites can help the small businesses gather the attitudes of the customer towards specific aspects of the business or the business in its entirety (Quinton, 2013).

   **Social customer relationship management as a business strategy**.  Social customer relationship management is apt as a business strategy because it integrates the need of a business to create value together with the customer and the desire to enhance the quality of service offered to the customers (Trainor, 2012).  The traditional system involved a company-centric approach to the creation of value.  This system has been superseded by a new approach where the customer has actively been involved in the creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).  The emergent economy is characterized by increased completion.  One of the new frontiers in competitive advantage is offering personalized opportunities for the customers to co-create value with the business as an enduring business strategy (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).  This business strategy has transformed the customer from a passive stakeholder to an active one.  Customers are no longer uninformed and isolated; instead, they are informed and well connected with the activities of the businesses.  Businesses do not work autonomously in designing their products, marketing them, and controlling the sale of the products without the input of the customers (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).  Social customer relationship management offers a

framework through which small businesses can involve the customers towards co-creation of value (Bridge, 2017).

Social customer relationship management as a business strategy benefits from the novel customer-focused tools provided in various social media platforms that can be used to interact with the customers within their preferred communication channels (Trainor et al., 2013). Some of the commonly used social media sites include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Snapchat (Harrigan & Miles, 2014; Joe, Seung-A Venus, & Jihoon, 2016). Some of the tools in these social media sites that can be used to engage with the customers include the ability to upload informative videos that can be viewed by the customers, engagement through posts, the ability to host polls to sample the perceptions of the customers and the private message capabilities where one can engage the customers privately and confidentially. In addition to these capabilities, there are other professional tools such as Hootsuite that small businesses can use enhance their use of social media sites for social customer relationship management. Hootsuite enables business owners to synchronize their communication over different social media platforms. It offers formatting capabilities so that the message is optimized individually so that it is attractive to the users of different social media sites (Bridge, 2017). As Bridge (2017) argued, the application resolves impediments to the use of social media sites such as inadequate time as well as limited competence because it performs most of the technical aspects for the users. In this way, social media optimizes business communication (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014).

Social media is appropriate for this strategy because its usage has increased exponentially in the recent past (Bridge, 2017). A study performed by Nielsen and IAB (2012) found that 92% of consumers trust the recommendations from friends and family members compared to other

modes of advertisement, a figure that represented an increase of 18% from 2007.  Social media sites allow the propagation of the word-of-mouth through the reviews given by people who have used the services or products offered by a business.  These reviews are important for a new customer who is looking at the social media profile of businesses.  Positive comments from previous customers, especially on products in which one is interested may not only offer leads for the business but also lead to more conversions (Bridge, 2017).  As reported by Schmitt, Skiera, and Van den Blute (2011), customers who are referred to a business are more value compared to non-referred customers because of the trust they have in the recommendation given by their friends, family members or people who have used the products or services offered by a business.

Social media relationship management has a positive effect on the relationships that small businesses have with their customers (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014).  A study performed by Choudhury and Harrigan (2014) to determine the effect that the use of social customer relationship management had on the relationship between the consumers and the businesses reported that there was an increased perception of loyalty to the business among the customers. The sampled customers also reported identifying with the business.  Social customer relationship management also helps create trust between the business and its customers, especially when the engagements are done in the public domain where other consumers can either take part or read the communication (Bridge, 2017).  The increase in trust and loyalty is likely to translate in increased sales.  This increase in sales has been demonstrated in studies such as the one performed by Rodriguez and Honeycutt (2011).  The researchers found that there was an increase in sales and performance of the businesses.  More precisely, Rodriguez and Honeycutt (2011) found that the 47% of the change experience in sales and 48.8% of the change

experienced in the performance of the businesses studied was attributable to social customer relationship management. This is empirical evidence that social customer relationships management is a viable strategy for small businesses that want to improve their relationship with consumers and by extension, sales, and operational performance.

Increase in the reminders of the wares and services on offer and a sustained online presence is associated with increased engagement with the customers (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). Effective use of social media for social customer relationship management requires an enduring online presence. The communication of products and services should be on an ongoing basis so the targeted customers are constantly reminded of the products and their qualities. Such a practice is likely also to evoke engagement from the customers.

In a survey of 250 small businesses, Harrigan and Miles (2014) found that decided on the effectiveness of social media as an appropriate tool for customer relationship management based on their sales and communication needs. These elements predict the continued and efficient use of social customer relationship management. The continued use is also encouraged by a fruitful engagement with customers on social media sites (Bridge, 2017). Consequently, social customer relationship management serves as a viable business strategy because, in addition to meeting the communication and marketing needs of the businesses, it also enables them to engage with their customers to forget stronger and sustainable relationships.

Social media allows a two-way communication where both the customers and the businesses can get immediate feedback from each other (Bridge, 2017). One-way communication platforms are disadvantageous because the communication is one way, for instance, from the business to the customer. The disadvantage is the proprietors of the business are not aware of the perceptions of the customers on the matter regarding which the

communication is made (Bridge, 2017). Social media offers a reprieve for businesses by offering a platform through which businesses can engage constructively with their customers. For every communication that the proprietors of the business make concerning social media sites, there is a provision for direct feedback from the recipients. Direct feedback paves the way for an engagement that helps not only the business but also the customers. The two-way communication also enhances customer participation in the co-creation of value by way of letting the consumers make suggestions on where improvements are needed (Bridge, 2017).

**Social customer relationship management delivering value**. In addition to a feeling of connectedness, small businesses should also aspire to create experiences that help create customer value for the time invested, information and endorsements gained and the attention they enjoy from the customers (Baird & Parasnis, 2011). From the customer's perspective, the value is the product of satisfaction with the services and products offered to them and the perception that they are of high quality. Quality is also a dimension in the engagement between the customers and the proprietors of the businesses. Quality is also a partial precipitator of satisfaction. This is to imply that the small businesses, in seeking to deliver value to their customers, should not just embed quality into the products and services, but also in customer communication. Even though social media is a tool through which businesses can communicate with their customers, it is important that the businesses considered their accounts on various social media sites as part of the business instead of as tools to aid in communication (Bridge, 2017). This will allow them to invest in whatever is necessary to help in delivering quality as they would in any part of the business.

Small businesses can use social customer relationship management to generate value by changing the perception of value to the customers (Marolt, Pucihar, & Zimmermann, 2015). The

gist of this argument is that the proprietors of the small businesses should seek to control the

content and direction of the engagements that they have with the customers.  A knowledge of the

target customers can help the proprietors of the small businesses to device strategies and

approaches to common talking points with their customers that allow them to define what

constitutes value for their customers.  The definition of value should be centered on the

capabilities of the businesses.  The advent of social media and its use in business communication

has eroded the control that businesses have had on the content and direction of communications.

This is because once the businesses communicate through social media, they lose control and

influence over the direction that the communication takes.  The users who are exposed to

communication can interpret it as diversely as their perspectives are.  However, the small

businesses can control the information they broadcast through this digital communication

channel and also package it in a way that communicates their definition of value (Marolt et al.,

2015).

      **Measuring social customer relationship management value**.  Measuring the value of

social customer relationship management is uniquely challenging because the quantitative

measures that are used in traditional customer relationship management are relatively

ineffectively in measuring the value of activities in social customer relationship management

(Greenberg, 2010).  Measuring value is important because it offers quantitative outputs that the

proprietors of small businesses can use to determine their performance with regard to delivering

value.  Measuring the value that social customer relationship management brings to the business

is a challenging task.  This is because the value is indirect in that unlike in e-commerce models

where the customers are sourced online, the situation is different in brick and mortar models

because one may not know the customers who learned of the business from the online

communications.  Additionally, it is not easy to determine whether the impressions that the marketing communications over social media sites are converted into sales.  Nonetheless, the proprietors of small business can use tools such as Google Analytics to determine the rate of engagement with social media platforms (Bridge, 2017).

**Customer engagement**.  The intention behind customer engagement is the creation of a connection with the customers (Luigi, Oana, Mihai, & Simona, 2011).  Customer engagement is aimed at collaborating and co-creating value for the business with the consumers.  It is no longer enough for customers to remain sidelined and only involved in unidirectional communication.  The involvement of the customers in the creation of value is important and leads to sustainability.  Customer engagement facilitates this collaboration and co-creation by allowing the businesses to learn what the customers prefer and need and then incorporating that into their strategies.  Customer engagement also calls upon the social capital for the benefit of the business (Bhalla, 2011).  Social capital in the form of the networks and relationships that the business forms with the consumers can be beneficial to the small businesses.  The social networks, for instance, are responsible for viral communication over the digital communication channels.  The viral communication might resonate with other customers who do not necessarily purchase from a business, a factor that can lead to the acquisition of new customers (Bhalla, 2011).

The interest in social media by the customers has pressured businesses to engage with time through these channels through active participation in the online communities (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).  Marketing requires businesses to engage with customers wherever they are found.  Because social media is a preferred communication channel for many people has necessitated businesses to also use the communication channel as an outlet to engage with their target consumers.  As Hajli (2015) argued, while social media does not provide a tool through

which the businesses can persuade all customer to purchase their wares, and from their business, it offers them a link through which they can communicate directly with the customers.  It is through the engagement that the businesses can communicate the quality of their products and hopefully lead the engagement to conversion.  Nonetheless, social customer relationship management, when combined with other ongoing marketing communication endeavors can help small businesses consolidate their position by forging close relationships with their customers.  Using web analytics as recommended by Ayanso and Lertwachara (2014), small businesses can use quantitative analytical approaches to measure the performance of their customer engagement.

Social media platforms allow interactive engagement with customers through two-way communication (Claffey & Brady, 2014).  Traditional approaches to marketing entailed a one-way communication where the marketing agencies developed content and broadcasted it to be seen by their targeted audience through various communication channels.  Social media has revolutionized the communication between the target audience and the businesses by allowing two-way communication.  This is a kind of communication that enables an interactive engagement between the target customers and the businesses.  Msimangira (2012) argued that two-way communication between the businesses and their target audience has significant benefits.  One of these benefits is that it allows businesses to manage their reputation. Individualized communication enables the proprietors of the small business to hold dialogues or multilogues with disgruntled customers.  This preempts negative communication of the business over social media sites.  The two-way communication also allows the businesses to prompt for feedback from their customers on various aspects of their businesses.  This feedback can be used in real-time to help improve the products, services or customer engagement.  The two-way

communication also allows the proprietors of the small businesses to answer any questions that their target audience might have.

Small businesses can benefit from the word-of-mouth of influential customers to spread the brands and marketing messages of the businesses on social media (Bridge, 2017). Word of mouth is very influential in marketing. The influence stems from the fact that the person talking about the business or a product has probably had an experience with it. Word of mouth is influential because it helps propagate communication about the business without the direct involvement of the business. Social media has negated the need for face-to-face interactions. Social media offers online digital channels through which happy or disgruntled customers can propagate their experiences with a product or the business. The various social media platforms offer a platform through which the communications about a product or the business can be disseminated to a large consumer audience. It is for this reason that word of mouth facilitates by social media is even more potent than the traditional word of mouth where communication required a face-to-face interaction (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2016). Businesses have now recognized the influence of word of mouth propagated through online channels on the beliefs and attitudes of the consumers and their purchasing behavior. As such the small businesses can use this word of mouth to leverage their conversations with the consumers over social media to lead to higher conversions and sales (Kimmel & Kitchen, 2016). However, it is noteworthy that word of mouth propagated through online channels and social media is as effective when propagating positive messages about a business or product as it is in propagating negative messages. This means that business has to be wary of the impact of word of mouth over social media in portraying the small business in a negative light. As was the case with a positive message, the negative messages also have the potential to influence the beliefs and attitudes of the consumers and their purchasing

behavior negatively.  This would manifest in decreased customer loyalty and sales (Kimmel &

Kitchen, 2016).

Social customer relationship management is different from traditional customer

relationship strategies in that the small businesses can direct their messages to their target

customers in order to initiate a conversation instead of the promoting messages to the target

audience in order to generate and sustain their interest in the business as is the case in the

traditional customer relationship management strategies (Bridge, 2017).  Traditional customer

relationship management strategies were aimed at gathering information from consumers.  The

information was then used to design specific marketing communication messages with the aim of

convincing the consumers to sustain their interest in the business and the specific products

(Bridge, 2017).  Social customer relationship management offers a different approach to

marketing communication in that it allows the proprietors of the businesses to direct messages to

specific customer basis to initiate a conversation.  According to Chu and Choi (2011), social

media has given businesses a variety of approaches through which they can collect information

from the customers.  In addition to using the web analytics to gather quantitative data, a business

can now, courtesy of social media, post prompts on their online presences using which they can

collect subjective data about their customers.  The proprietors of the small business can also seek

the information directly from the individual customers during the two-way conversations.

An equally helpful experience between the proprietors of the small businesses and their

customers through social customer relationship management helps create strong bonds of trust

(Chen, Yeh, & Yeh, 2011).  The strong bonds of trust are the product of direct engagement with

the consumers.  The proprietors of the small businesses are able to know their customers more

intimately than would have been the case if they were using the traditional customer relationship

management approach or the traditional approaches to marketing communication. The

consumers can relay their concerns over social media sites and get immediate remedies. Social

media helps create a mutually beneficial relationship between the consumer audience and the

proprietors of small businesses. The mutual benefit is in the fact that through social media, the

proprietors of the small businesses can gather the information that they need from the consumer

audience and use it to improve their products, services and customer engagement while the

consumers get an enhanced customer experience as well as improved products and services

(Rodriguez, Ajjan, & Peterson, 2014). This mutually beneficial relationship also manifests

through improved sales to the benefit of the proprietors of the small businesses. Therefore, it is

important for the proprietors of small businesses to leverage the potential of social customer

relationship management towards helping their business compete favorably and flourish into

sustainable and economically viable enterprises.

**Improving customer relationships through social customer relationship**

**management strategies**. Social media enables the proprietors of small businesses to share

information with the customers thereby enhancing engagement as well as creating stronger

relationships (Rodriquez, Peterson, & Krishnan, 2012). Small businesses are not always seeking

to prompt their target audience for information. At times, they want to disseminate information

that may be of benefit to their customers. One scenario where the proprietors of the small

businesses might want to share information with their customers is when communicating an

imminent promotion in their stores for specific products. Social media is an apt digital channel

through which this information can be disseminated because many of the target audience of the

small businesses might prefer social media as an appropriate channel for communication as

argued by Bridge (2017). Sharing this information enhances engagement between the

proprietors of the small businesses and target audience, a factor that facilitates the development of strong and sustainable relationships.

Conversations in social media are relatively organic and original because the customers are not prompted to answer predetermined questions (Ramnarayan, 2015). This is especially the case when the customers respond to the information shared by the proprietors of the small businesses voluntarily. Organic conversations are a good indicator of the perceptions of the consumers about a business. Because the consumers are willing to engage with the business through social media platforms without any prompt is an indication that the consumers are either interested in the products or the business. It is also indicative of the positive customer experience. Organic conversations are also beneficial for the proprietors of small businesses because while they constitute communication and impression that can be seen by other consumers, the proprietors of the small businesses do not incur any direct costs.

Businesses can use social media channels to group their target customers based on a commonality of their interests thereby allowing the small businesses to target them more efficiently (Trainor, Andzulis, Rapp, & Agnihotri, 2014). Targeting is an important concept in marketing. Targeting entails directing specific marketing efforts towards a defined group of consumers. Appropriate targeting is the product of a combination of an apt understanding of the consumer characteristics in the defined segment. Social media channels can help the proprietors of small businesses understand their target consumers enough to group them into defined categories. This information can further be used to design specific marketing activities that are suitable for the consumers in variously defined groups. This facilitates the kind of targeting that is likely to generate sales. In this way, the use of social media not only helps in generating value

for the business but also aids in improving the manner in which the business relates to the customers (Bridge, 2017).

Small businesses can use groups as online communities as part of their social customer relationship management to establish conversations and build relationships with similar needs, interests, and feelings (Bridge, 2017). Social capital is important for businesses. Social capital entails the relationships and networks that a business has and can leverage to enhance marketing communication (Bhalla, 2011). Online communities around the business are ways for the proprietors of small businesses to create social capital. The online communities are a collection of all people who have had an engagement with the business. They are forums on which the target audience can share their experiences, post questions to which a representative of the small business can respond and create content about the business that is visible to other people. Such content can help enhance brand equity as argued by Bhalla (2011). There is a caveat that the online communities can also lead to negative publicity, especially if unhappy customers share their negative experiences with other community members. Irrespective, it is also an opportunity for the proprietors of small businesses to address the issues and also develop lessons that can be used in improving customer experience.

**Social customer relationship management characteristics**. The three features of social customer relationship management include technology, relationship, and augmentation (Jacewicz & Cho, 2015). These features are characterized by the main tenets that characterize social customer relationship management.

**Relationship**. This feature describes the intention of businesses that adopt this strategy to build sustainable relationships with their customers (Jacewicz & Cho, 2015). Intention describes the attitude of the proprietors of small businesses regarding the use of social customer

relationship management.  This attitude is influenced by many other factors among which is the knowledge that the effective management of the relationship between the customer and the small businesses can help create a competitive advantage (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2014).  According to Orzan, Platon, Stefanescu, and Orzan (2016), the effective management of the relationship between the customer and the small businesses can help erect barriers in the market that prevent the entry of other competitors.  This is because of the increased loyalty of the customers courtesy of an enhance customer engagement and experience.  This is an occurrence of benefit to the proprietors of the small businesses because it allows them the time and space to anticipate the need of the customers as well as to develop products that are not only innovative but also those that respond to the needs of the customers.  The intention of the proprietors of the small business to build enduring relationships with their customers is an indication of their comprehension of the benefits that they stand to draw.

The small businesses should involve their customers in forging sustainable relationships because of their role in enhancing the value of the marketing efforts in which the small businesses engage (Bridge, 2017).  The contemporary approaches to market reflect an understanding that customers are no longer satisfied with being sidelined and being subject to one-way communications.  According to Bhalla (2011), customers want to be involved in the process of creating value for the businesses from which they purchase their wares.  Through co-creation, the proprietors of small businesses can enhance the value of their marketing efforts by involving consumers.  Social customer relationship management is an avenue through which the proprietors of small businesses can co-create value together with their customers.  It is partly for this reason that the proprietors of small businesses should want to use customer relationship management.  Its effectiveness in co-creating value has been demonstrated by Rodriguez et al.

(2014) demonstrated through their study that there was an increase in the sales in a business where they used social media to help manage the relationships with their customers. By exploiting this advantage, the proprietors of small businesses can ensure that that they remain not only competitive but also profitable.

**Technological**. This feature describes the two-way collaborative engagement that is enabled through different technologies (Jacewicz & Cho, 2015). The traditional approaches to marketing did not provide a two-way communication facility. The communication was unidirectional, often from the business to the customer. The communication was not collaborative or engaging because the businesses hardly received any feedback from their target audience. The digital technologies available to the small businesses today have improved the communication between the customer and the businesses. The communication is not only two-way; it is also collaborative and engaging. The collaborative and engaging nature of that conversation is what social customer relationship management seeks to exploit for the benefit of the consumer and the small businesses (Chen & Popovich, 2003; Chen et al., 2011).

**Augmentation**. This feature describes the ability of small businesses to implement social customer relationship management strategies with effectiveness (Jacewicz & Cho, 2015). It is not just enough for the proprietors of small businesses to open accounts on various social media platforms. There is much more to implementing an effective social customer relationship management than having and maintaining an online presence on different social media sites. Effective implementation requires the development of an implementation strategy that in addition to being sound, is also complementary to the existing marketing strategies within the small business.

**Small business struggle**.  Statistics show that over 50% of the small businesses do not sustain their operation past the initial five years due to the ineffectiveness of their marketing strategies among other issues (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012).  Marketing is so important to a business that when it is implemented ineffectively, a growing business may stagnate and eventually fail.  This is a common outcome of 50% of the small businesses according to Cronin-Gilmore (2012).  While there are other forces that might be at play, Cronin-Gilmore (2012) argued that poorly designed marketing strategies have a significant influence on failure.  Poorly designed marketing strategies result in unsuccessful segmentation, targeting and positioning of the business.  This means that the products and services of the small businesses are not visible to the intended audience.  Even when they are visible, the products and the brands are not positioned well enough to edge the efforts of the competitors in attracting the attention of the customers.  Ultimately, the small businesses, despite incurring operational costs, are unable to generate enough revenue to break even.  Eventually, 50% of them fail to sustain their operations past the first five years of operations (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012).

The human resource context in which the small businesses operate is characterized by a small number of employees in different operational areas, a scenario that can affect the implementation of social customer relationship management strategies due to a dearth of know how (Sasinovskaya & Anderson, 2011).  The proprietors of small businesses may not all be able to commit departmental resources to oversee the implementation of social customer relationship management.  A departmental approach is beneficial because it is a formal arrangement to which resources are committed.  These resources can be used for building capabilities and competencies in the workforce.  In the event that a departmental approach is not feasible, the role of implementing the social customer relationship management might fall on any one or several

employees within the small business. There might be a struggle in such a scenario, especially if the employees tasked with implementing the social customer relationship management do not have the know-how or the advanced skill to perform an effective implementation (Bridge, 2017).

While big businesses use big data to target their customers, the small businesses that have limited resources can give a differentiated approach characterized by a personal touch (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). It is expected that the small businesses may not be able to compete favorably with large businesses courtesy of the influence of disparities in the resource-base. Therefore, big businesses have the financial ability to invest in and use big data for the purposes of targeting while the small businesses might not be able to compete on the same footing. However, small businesses can offer a differentiated approach from the one offered by large businesses. Due to the size of the operations of the large business and their often-large customer bases, they are not able to offer individualized service. This is where small businesses can differentiate their approach by offering an individualized approach and a personal touch (Bridge, 2017).

**Business success and failure**. The importance of a customer to the small businesses requires the proprietors to remain updated on the changes in the demands of their customers and use this knowledge to formulate targeting strategies (Bueren, Schierholz, Kolbe, & Brenner, 2004). Consumers are dynamic. Their preferences need and want change with time. Trends in consumer behavior change over time. The proprietors of small businesses who want to maintain customer loyalty, engagement and experience should aspire to remain informed of the changes in the preferences, needs, and wants of their target consumers. Remaining updated is important for the success of small businesses because it predicts the appropriateness of the targeting strategies. The targeting strategies of business should keep evolving in tandem with the changes in the preferences of the consumers. Remaining informed of the changes in the preferences of their

customers as well as consumer behavior will also help the proprietors of the small businesses to redesign their products and services so that they reflect the solutions to the needs of the consumers (Bridge, 2017).

Strategies in customer relationship management should be focused on customers (Schlin, 2014). A failure to understand the importance of focusing on the customer when implementing customer relationship management platforms has led to the failure of many of these endeavors as argued by Kirkby (2002). The author also noted that customer relationship management strategies should be primarily concerned with the life cycle of the customer. A customer base is only an asset to the proprietor of the small business of the level of loyalty that characterizes the customer base results in an increase in customer value. The proprietors of small businesses are not helpless in helping create the value of their customer bases. Kirkby (2002) advised that the proprietors of the small businesses can increase the loyalty in their customer base through the acquisition of valuable customers and use the customer relationship management strategy to develop the potential customer value by giving them a good customer experience. Tamošiūniene and Jasilioniene (2007) also argued for focusing on the customer when they stated that the focus of small business should be to market to individual customers rather than dealing with them as mass. They also argued that customer relationship management strategies could help enhance the individual handling of customers and the creation of an idyllic relationship with the customer. This means that rather than focus on the business itself, the proprietors of small businesses should endeavor to attract and build the value of their customers.

Customer relationship management strategies should aim to anticipate the needs of the target consumers, gain insights on the motivation of the customers, engage with the customers using information technologies, enhance the quality of service delivery, and add touch-points

through targeted promotions in online communities (Schlin, 2014). Anticipating the needs of the consumers requires the proprietors of small businesses to understand their customers. Customer relationship management offers a way for the proprietors of small businesses to understand their customers. The information gained from the analysis of the customer databases can offer the proprietors of the small businesses the insights that they require to understand their customers even more. The proprietors of the small businesses can use the insights that they gain from the analysis of the customer databases to gain an understanding of the factors that motivate their customers to engage with their businesses or to purchase certain types of products. The proprietors of the small businesses can then use this information to enhance their service delivery. The proprietors of the small businesses can also use the insights they gain to create promotions that are targeted at the customers for a product that meet their needs.

Strategies in customer relationship management should benefit from a customer database, the analysis of the data contained therein, using the insights gained from the analysis to make decisions, and using appropriate tools and approach to target one's customers (Winer, 2001). The objectives that the proprietors of small businesses need to implement effectively and in a sustained manner include the implementation of a customer database, the analysis of the information contained in the customer databases, the use of the insights gained from the analysis of the database in decision-making, the develop or acquisition of proprietary tools to facilitate the effective targeting of the customers and the development of performance indicators to help determine the success or failure of the efforts in customer relationship management. It is noteworthy that these objectives are not just organization-oriented; they also include customer orientation, a desire to recognize what the customer desires. The overall success of the customer relationship management endeavors is determining what the customers want and working

towards responding to those needs.  The implementation of these objectives helps place the

business and its customer relationship management endeavors on the path towards success.

      **Customer relationship management success**.  Effective and sustained implementation

of the objectives identified by Winer (2001) is important to achieve success in customer

relationship management.  The objectives to which this argument allude include investing in a

customer database, the analysis of the data contained therein, using the insights gained from the

analysis to make decisions, and using appropriate tools and approach to target one's customers

(Winer, 2001).  Some of these objectives amount capital investments that are not depletable.

However, it is important to sustain the efforts for the other objectives because they are important

for the continuity of the benefits that the proprietors of the small businesses stand to gain.  The

insights to be gained from the analysis of the customer data contained in the databases not only

helps the efforts of the business towards customer relationship management but can also be used

for the improvement of operational functions of the small businesses.

      The soft and hard approach should be used inclusively in order to enhance customer

experience and also contribute to the success of social customer relationship management

(Bridge, 2017).  More precisely, Bridge (2017) called for a combination of both soft and hard

skills during the management of customer relationship management as a project.  The soft

approach entails the use of tactical aspects, particularly the development of strategies for a more

efficient implementation of social customer relationship management.  The soft approach also

entails developing new strategies that can enhance the engagement with the customers using

social media sites and how this engagement can be augmented to help foster strong relationships.

The hard approach is different in that it entails prompting for and gathering feedback from the

target audience.  The hard approach entails the management and analysis of the data in order to gain helpful insight that can then be used to facilitate the success of (Payne & Frow, 2006).

       **Customer relationship management failure**.  The failure of strategies in customer relationship management is caused by a failure to monitor the role of employees in the implementation of the strategies (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).  There are diverse roles in the implementation of customer relationship management.  The many roles cannot all be performed by the proprietor of the small business.  Consequently, they are assigned to different employees. Even after assuming that employees to whom different customer relationship management roles have been assigned have the requisite competencies and capabilities, it is still important for the proprietors of the small businesses to monitor the manner in which they dispense their roles. According to Grabner-Kraeuter, Moedritscher, Waiguny, and Mussnig (2007), the monitoring should not be limited to the economic performance of the customer relationship management. Instead, the monitoring should also seek to assess the operational elements of the employee's work to determine congruence with the organizational perspective.  Alamgir and Shamsuddoha (2015) also argued that since their roles in customer relationship management involve the delivery of a service, it is important to monitor their delivery to determine whether it reflects the quality and compliance with the standard operating procedures outlined in the implementation strategy for the customer relationship management endeavors.  This will help prevent the failure of customer relationship management endeavors by identifying areas of conflict and implementing corrective actions as preemptive measures.

       The attitude of the employees has a direct relationship with the customer experience and the creation of value (Plakoyiannaki, Tzokas, Dimitratos, & Saren, 2008).  Employee attitude is very important when offering a service or engaging with the customers.  As argued by Cambra-

Fierro, Melero-Polo, and Vazquez-Carrasco (2014), employee attitudes influence their non-transactional behaviors.  These are the kind of behaviors that include blogging, word of mouth and demeanor when in the presence of a client or while offering an actual service.  Attitude is even more important for frontline employees because their roles in a small business entail engaging with the customers constantly.  The frontline employees also act as the gatekeepers for the small businesses.  They are the ones that usher in the customers to the business and make the first impression on behalf of the proprietors.  The frontline employees also act as the de facto spokespeople of the businesses.  Due to the importance of their role, their performance has a significant impact on the satisfaction and engagement of the customers (Cambra-Fierro et al., 2014).

The involvement of the customer is indispensable to the realization of success in the strategies small businesses implemented towards customer relationship management (Papadopoulos, Ojiako, Chipulu, & Lee, 2012).  The involvement of the customer should not be passive where the proprietors of the small businesses send messages targeting their customers.  Instead, active engagement is encouraged where the customers contribute to actions and ideas to the business.  Seeing that the intent of implementing social customer relationship management is to enhance the communication between the business and the customers as a prerequisite for enhanced customer engagement and experience, it is imperative that their involvement is substantial.  In making this argument, Anshari and Almunawar (2012) argued that the customer's involvement in the creation of value for the shareholder should not just be through their purchases and the revenue that results from such actions.  Instead, customers have valuable insights that when gathered and used effectively by the proprietors of the small businesses, can lead to improved operations, increased customer loyalty and enhance customer experience.  In

the same breath, Bhalla (2011) argued for the co-creation of value in the small businesses by involving the customers.  The customers know what they like and when prompted well, are willing to inform the businesses.

A lack of enabling frameworks for social customer relationship management contributes significantly to the failure of such initiatives (Grabner-Kraeuter & Moedritscher, 2002).  There are many reasons for which different social customer relationship management endeavors have not performed as well as was projected.  According to Almotari (2009), there are different enabling frameworks that an organization or small business should implement to offer support for their social customer relationship management efforts.  According to Forsyth (2002), 22% of the efforts in social customer relationship management fail because of the policies implemented by the company or the lack of inertia.  The author also argued that another 29%, 20%, and six percent of the efforts in social customer relationship management end in failure because of a lack of organizational change to support the new consumer communication paradigm, an insufficient comprehension of customer relationship management and the lack of capabilities and competencies required to implement customer relationship management endeavors properly.  These among other aspects provide the enabling framework that the implementers of customer relationship management require.  The lack of enabling frameworks in a small business will most likely predict the failure of their efforts towards customer relationship management.

**Social customer relationship management formula**.  Social media can help the proprietors of small businesses to understand their customers as a prerequisite for the success of their strategies towards customer relationship management (Bridge, 2017).  Communication is essential whether the businesses are going to understand their customers.  Communication, in this case, need not be conscious.  The proprietors of small businesses can glean information

about their targeted customers from social media profiles.  These profiles on various platforms as

the users to list their biographic information.  This includes their likes, dislikes, education

background and other things that marketers might find of interest when targeting a particular

audience.  Alternatively, the proprietors of the small businesses can prompt from specific

information from their customers through conversations or through specifically designed

surveys.  This information allows the proprietors of small businesses or their marketers to have a

better understanding of their customers.  Valenzuela (2013) underscored the importance of

understanding one's customers to the delivery of good services and products to them.

The proprietors of small businesses need an appropriate marketing plan that they can

complement using social media (Bridge, 2017).  This argument implies that social media should

not be used as the sole marketing strategy for the business.  The proprietors of small businesses

should design marketing strategies and plans for their businesses.  These marketing plans should

feature strategies for marketing communication, popularizing the products and services on offer,

attracting new customers, enhancing customer loyalty and managing customer engagement.

Eriksson and Larsson (2014) argued that Facebook should not be used as the sole marketing

strategy but rather as a driver for facilitating improved customer relationship.  This approach

allows the proprietors of the small businesses to get the best out of the existing marketing

strategies as well as improving the effectiveness of social media as a channel for communication

between the customers and the business (Orenga-Rogla & Chalmeta, 2016).

Small businesses can enhance their online communication by relying on influential

personalities such as bloggers to spread the word about the businesses (Bridge, 2017).  Spreading

the word about a business is an influential way of marketing, especially if the word is being

disseminated from trusted or popular sources.  Spreading the word about a business partly

exploits the value of customer sentiment (Sankar & Bouchard, 2009). Customer sentiment relates to the positive or negative feelings that customer shave as a result of the experience they had with the businesses or the products sold by the businesses. In the case of positive customer sentiments, businesses want such customer to help spread positive feelings. Alternatively, the proprietors of small businesses can rely on the popularity of bloggers to help raise awareness about businesses. The bloggers of interest to businesses are those with a large following, particularly the following that predominantly comprises of the target audience of the small businesses. The proprietors of small businesses can exploit the social capital of the bloggers in popularizing their businesses (Sankar & Bouchard, 2009).

The proprietors of small businesses should study and analyze the conversations in their online communities for gainful insights (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). There are more insights to be gained about online communications by analyzing the conversations that occur in online sites. This insight may not be apparent from plainly reading the messages that characterize the conversations. According to Hansen, Schneiderman, and Smith (2011), analyzing social media networks helps the users learn more from collective conversations than they would gain from reading individual conversations. Some of these insights could include the time of day when the users are likely to engage with a page, the conversations initiated by people with certain demographic attributes, the geographic location of the people who engage with the businesses, and the number of impressions about a brand or product among other insights. The proprietors of small businesses can then use this information to improve different aspects of their businesses.

The purpose for which the communication is intended should influence the selection of social media sites to use (Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014). Different social media platforms offer unique communicating experiences. Twitter, for instance, allows the user to communicate their

ideas using a defined number of characters.  This implies that Twitter would not be an

appropriate social media site for a business that wants to disseminate lengthy communications.

Conversely, Facebook offers the opportunity to disseminate very lengthy communications.

These communications could also include attachments of videos, images, graphs and other

presentation media.  This implies that Facebook would be appropriate when businesses want to

disseminate detailed messages to their target audience.  Therefore, it is important for the

proprietors of small businesses to choose the social media sites that meet their specific

communication needs.  It is even more advantageous for small businesses to operate multiple

social media platforms.  They can then choose the social media platforms that best suit their

communication needs.

The goals and objectives of the strategies towards customer relationship management

should be achievable (Woodcock, Green, & Starket, 2011).  The proprietors of small businesses

will often set goals to help assess the rate at which their efforts towards customer relationship

management are generating the desired benefits.  While this is a prudent move in that it offers an

objective evaluation, it is important to avoid ambitious goals that are not achievable.  One of the

goals that the proprietors of small businesses might set with respect to customer relationship

management is to have a certain return on their investment.  Using the return on investment as a

measure of performance is advantageous because it assesses the performance of the small

business in monetary terms (Kumar & Reinartz, 2006).  However, it is discouraged to set lofty

goals that do not reflect an understanding of the needs of the customers, their behavior and the

potential of social customer relationship management.  Such goals are likely to unnecessarily

drain the resources of the small businesses whose proprietors might invest more resources in the

pursuit of the goals.  Such lofty goals may also demotivate the proprietors of the small businesses in using social customer relationship management, especially when they are not met.

**Summary of the literature review**.  Social customer relationship management can help small businesses forge sustainable relationships with their customers.  This feat is achievable because the approach to customer relationship management exploits the digital communication channels where a large proportion of the consumer audience can be found.  The review of the literature has shown that the use of social media platforms has increased in the recent past.  The increase is partly because of the proliferation of enabling infrastructures such as the internet and the fact that virtually all the social media sites are optimized to be used on mobile phones.  Consequently, these social sites enjoy large user subscription numbers.  Social customer relationship management entails the use of social media as a tool for customer engagement.  Considering the fact that many of the target customers are likely to be found on social media with the exception of some industries, the proprietors of the small businesses can benefit by using this channel to engage with their customers.  Given that it is a two-way communication channel, the two stakeholders can exchange communication.  The back and forth foster an understanding between the customer and the business, an understanding that is not only important for enhancing customer engagement but also fostering strong and sustainable relationships with the customers.

Social media offers the digital channels, data, and tools that the proprietors of the small businesses would otherwise not have afforded.  The digital channels are in the form of the different social media platforms available for the proprietors of small businesses.  Some of the more popular platforms include Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.  However, the popularity of a social media site is influenced by different factors such as the geographical region and the

purpose for which the platform is designed. While the three platforms above are universally popular, a small business using an e-commerce platform that wants to target customers in China might want to use WeChat as one of its social media platforms seeing that WeChat is commonly used in this region. Regardless, these platforms have tools that the proprietors of small businesses can use in analyzing user data to gain various insights. There are also relatively cheap proprietary tools that can be used with the social media platforms to offer even more in-depth analysis of the consumer. These tools are important for a successful implementation of social customer relationship management. The benefit for the proprietors of the small businesses is that these tools are cost friend compared to the alternatives that are used in mainstream customer relationship management.

The small businesses can implement successful strategies towards social customer relationship management by setting small achievable goals and updating them with time. Some of the goals of interest for the small businesses might be the rate at which the consumers engage with their social media pages, customer satisfaction rate, the perception of quality of customer engagement and how these indicators translate to business performance. However, the proprietors of the small businesses should know that social customer relationship management is not a quick fix that you plug into the communication strategies of the businesses for quick results. The success of social customer relationship management endeavors is something that builds over time. It is also influenced by the effect of the existing marketing strategies. Since these strategies are responsible for informing the consumers about the business, their effectiveness has a direct theoretical relationship to the effectiveness of the social customer relationship management when customer-related factors are held constant. Considering this

information, it is prudent for the proprietors of the small businesses to set small goals that are

achievable also considering their resource situation and only updating them as time progresses.

Social media should only serve to complement existing communication strategies and not

serve as the sole strategy. This is to mean that social customer relationship management should

not be used as the sole strategy towards marketing. Instead, social customer relationship

management should be used to complement the existing strategy. This is because social

customer relationship management only focuses on customer engagement in that it is primarily a

communication channel. A pre-existing strategy that describes the efforts of the small businesses

towards marketing and how they should be coordinated should already be in operation. The

review of the literature showed that this is the best way to ensure the effective use of social

customer relationship management. Part of the existing strategy might entail the use of different

promotion methods to increase the awareness of the business or new products on its product line.

An existing marketing strategy will ensure marketing communication for the business and its

products. The social customer relationship management facility will offer a channel through

which the customers can engage with the businesses.

A proper implementation plan should follow a well-designed strategy for social customer

relationship management. Even after deciding on the use of social media towards customer

relationship management, the proprietors of the small businesses should not just open platforms

on various social media sites and start posting uncoordinated messages and marketing

communications. The decision to use social media for the purposes of customer relationship

management should be followed by the development of an implementation strategy that

complements the existing marketing strategy and activities. The implementation strategy should

also identify the necessary capabilities and competencies in the small business that are required

in the implementation of social customer relationship management.  Perhaps a needs assessment, and a survey of the competencies and capabilities in the organization can be performed.  The proprietors of the small businesses should build the competencies within the small business if they are found to be missing so as to ensure that the implementation process is not only seamless; it is also effective.

The attitude and mindset of the owners and employees will influence customer experience and its impact on sales.  It is not enough to just implement a social customer relationship management strategy.  It is also important for the proprietors of small business to have a positive attitude and mindset.  A positive mindset and attitude of the proprietors will enable them to make minimal investments in facilitating the effective use of social customer relationship management.  For instance, a positive mindset and attitude of the proprietors about the use of social customer relationship management will motivate them to train their employees in customer service, professionalism in customer engagement and the use different analytical tools available in order to determine the performance of their social customer relationship management endeavors.

Enhancing how businesses relate to their customers will not only help create value for the business and the customer, but also aid in the realization of the value by the customers.  Social customer relationship management helps enhance the relationship between the small businesses and their customers by offering a channel through which they can engage in two-way communication.  Two-way communication is beneficial because, in addition to offering real-time feedback, the customers can also offer suggestions and recommendations to the proprietors of small businesses.  In this way, the customers are involved in the creation of value.  Co-creation of value is one of the ways through which the small businesses can create and sustain a

competitive advantage.  The customers are aware of the value because they are external stakeholders involved in its creation.

The use of social customer relationship management can help the small businesses to compete with the big businesses irrespective of the limited resource context in which they operate.  This is because social customer relationship management offers the proprietors of small businesses an effective approach to customer relationship management that is also not cost-intensive.  Consequently, the proprietors of small businesses get to implement the all-important customer relationship management despite their limited budgets.  This, in turn, enables them to create and sustain strong relationships with their customers.  Improved customer relationships breed customer loyalty.  Customer loyalty is among the factors that will help small businesses compete with their larger and more affluent competitors.

**Transition and Summary of Section 1**

The qualitative inquiry into how the proprietors of small businesses perceive the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management is important for customer engagement and enhancing customer experience.  According to Jacewicz and Cho (2015), there are no standardized methods at present that can be used to assist the proprietors of small businesses in determining the effectiveness of using social customer relationship management.  Consequently, the proprietors are left to use subjective means, some of which are not quantifiable.

Even when the proprietors use quantifiable measures, the accuracy with which they attribute changes in the operations of their businesses or important outcomes such as customer loyalty, retention and sales to social customer relationship management may be debatable.  The unique nature and target audience of small businesses influence differences in the use of social

media.  This qualitative study aims to understand by sampling the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia, their use of social media, their attitude towards the use of social media for customer relationship management, their strategies, and the value they derive from customer engagement using social media.  The knowledge gained from this qualitative inquiry will lead to a better understanding of the stance of the proprietors, the aim in using social media, and the strategies they employ to aid the effective implementation of social customer relationship management.  The knowledge will also facilitate in the preparation of recommendations to address the issue of lack of awareness of the potential that social customer relationship management has for the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.

Section 2: The Project

The second section of this qualitative study discusses the project that is the implementation of the qualitative study.  This section discusses the role of the researcher in the project and the participants from whom the data were collected.  This section also discusses the research method and design used, the study population and the selection of the study sample, the data collection techniques and data organization techniques, the data analysis procedures, and the issues with reliability and validity.  The section then culminates in a summary of the section.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia.  A quantitative study performed by Harrigan and Miles (2014) recommended future studies to explore how the use of social media could help the proprietors of small businesses to engage with their customers with a focus on the effect on the ability of the small businesses to attract and retain more customers.  Harrigan and Miles (2014) had recommended the use of qualitative methodologies in order to gain an in-depth insight into the phenomenon.

The recommendation by Harrigan and Miles (2014) was a major influence on the qualitative study.  The two researchers reported that resources were a significant limiting factor for customer relationship management in small businesses.  The proprietors of the small businesses often have to prioritize the available resources to the many competing functions. Often, the allocation of resources towards customer relationship management endeavors is minimal while in other cases, the allocation of resources is entirely skewed to other business functions at the expense of customer relationship management.  This necessitates a cost-effective

approach through which the proprietors of the small businesses can not only gain insight into their customers but also engage with them.

The increasing significance of social media for business communication provides a reprieve for the proprietors of small businesses because, in addition to being cost-effective, many of the targeted customers also use social media platforms for their personal communication needs. Therefore, the study aimed to explore whether its use in customer relationship management enhances the ability of the small businesses to attract and retain customers compared to those that do not use social customer relationship management.

**Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher is critical in qualitative research because he is involved in the collection and analysis of the data (Fink, 2000). Unlike in quantitative research where the most research is carried out through surveys without the involvement of the researcher, the researcher is more involved during the data collection phase of the qualitative research (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The study is qualitative in nature. This section outlines and discusses the role that the researcher played in the implementation of the qualitative study.

While the discussion focused on the researcher's role during the data collection phase, the section also included insights on the role that the researcher played during the other phases of the implementation of the study.

The difference in the research protocols between qualitative and quantitative research influences some of the roles of the researcher in qualitative research. Quantitative research, unlike qualitative research, uses standardized methods, instruments, and measures (Fink, 2000). While this is not the case in qualitative research, the researcher still needs to ensure credibility,

transferability, and dependability of their findings.  To ensure credibility, transferability, and dependability of findings, Sutton and Austin (2015) prescribed that the researcher undertakes the following roles.

**Monitoring and reducing bias**.  One of the roles of the researcher in qualitative researcher is monitoring for bias and developing strategies for eliminating it.  Bias invalidates research.  Bias refers to any influence, internal or external, that distorts the findings from a qualitative study (Polit & Beck, 2014).  The threat of bias to the rigor of the methodologies and designs used in qualitative studies and trustworthiness of findings from the findings of those studies as Thorne, Stephens, and Truant (2016) argued.  More criticism is leveled against qualitative research compared to quantitative research when it comes to bias and its influence on the study findings (Smith & Noble, 2014).  The criticism particularly relates to an absence of transparency regarding the analytical processes that qualitative researchers use in manipulating their data to derive meaning.

It is important for qualitative researchers to demonstrate that their methods and designs have rigor, engage in transparency, openness, and utilize analytical methods that are not only relevant to practice but also methods that are in agreement with the methodological approaches used in the study (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).  The qualitative researcher has a role not only to monitor and eliminate bias but also one to help his readers understand how the data were analyzed.  This role requires the researcher to be transparent about the approaches used in developing the themes during analysis.  According to Smith and Noble (2014), this helps to demonstrate that the findings of the qualitative study are both valid and reliable.

The qualitative researcher, in playing their role in identifying and minimizing the bias in their studies, can perform background checks on the respondents before including them in the list

of participants to ensure that they possess the information that the researcher is seeking as Morse et al. (2002) argued. Qualitative researchers can also compare the accounts given by the participants periodically throughout the study (Morse et al., 2002) to identify any outliers and any inconsistencies in the accounts given by the participants. The qualitative researcher, in playing this role, should also ensure that the accounts of outliers and the divergent perspectives given by the participants are also included in the report of findings. Qualitative researchers can also identify and minimize the bias in their studies by monitoring the participants constantly, performing independent analyses of the data collected in other studies on the same field of study and performing data triangulation (Morse et al., 2002). Data triangulation refers to the process through which the researcher verifies his data by comparing data from diverse sources (Morse et al., 2002).

**Types of Bias**

      **Design bias.** The approaches discussed above can only be achieved if the qualitative researcher is aware of some of the sources of bias. One of the sources of bias with which the researcher in his role of identifying and eliminating bias must worry is design bias. This is a bias that results when the researcher develops methodologies and designs that are incongruent with the aims of the study. An example is using a survey design to explore the experiences of a population with a certain phenomenon. While the survey design will surely derive data for the researcher, the data will not have the necessary depth to explore the experiences of the study participants with the subject being studied (Smith & Noble, 2014).

      Design bias can also be the result of the influence of the beliefs of the researchers on the decisions regarding the research questions, aims, and methodologies. An example of the influence of personal beliefs is when a pharmaceutical developer who believes in the efficacy of

a drug in treating a certain condition selects research questions that demonstrate the efficacy of the said drug.  The personal beliefs of the pharmaceutical developer are introduced into the design of the study.  The study ceases to be objective.  Instead, it subjectively advances the beliefs of the pharmaceutical developer.  There is a high likelihood that in such a scenario, the findings of the study will overwhelmingly prove the efficacy of the drug.

**Participant bias.**  Participant bias is another source of bias for which the qualitative researcher should be keen to identify and eliminate.  Most qualitative studies will use non-probability sampling methods such as purposive sampling, snowballing and convenient sampling among others.  While representativeness is not a primary concern in many qualitative studies, there is the issue of saturation about which the researcher should worry.  According to Boddy (2016), qualitative researchers should sample enough participants to ensure saturation of the information generated.  Saturation is a state where adding more samples is unlikely to generate new knowledge about the subject being studied (Boddy, 2016).

Selection bias can also result from a lack of representation.  In a scenario where a researcher is seeking parent perspectives about the influence of television on the development of their children, a study that on selects mothers is likely to report findings that are biased.  The bias emanates from the fact that the findings of that sample do not include the perspectives of the fathers (Smith & Noble, 2014).  Therefore, qualitative researchers should review their sample and sampling methods to identify any sources of participant bias.

**Measurement and data collection bias.**  Qualitative researchers should also be keen to identify and eliminate measurement and data collection bias (Smith & Noble, 2014).  As was the case in the design bias, the personal beliefs and inclinations of the researcher might influence the way he or she collects the data.  The collection of qualitative data is significantly different from

the data collection process in quantitative research.  The discretion of the researcher has a significant influence on the collection of data in qualitative data.

**Sample size**.  The researcher determines when there are sufficient data when using qualitative data collection tools.  This is particularly the case when semi-structured interview schedules are used in the collection of the data.  The researcher also controls the direction of the data when data collection approaches such as focus group discussions are used (Sargeant, 2012; Sutton & Austin, 2015).  It is evident that the researcher has a significant and direct role to play in the data collection process.

**Questionnaire ordering**.  The way the qualitative researcher poses questions during the interviews will have a significant influence on the way the participant answers the questions and by extension, the data collected.  In a scenario where the researcher asks close-ended questions, the responses of the participants are likely to be a yes or a not.  While yes and no responses might give insight into the perspectives of the participants, the responses are not rich enough to enable an analysis of their experiences which the research phenomenon as reported by Agee (2009).  Additionally, the researcher could also ask leading questions.  These are questions that limit the participants to the direction of the response.  They are often loaded with perspectives of the researcher or what the researcher believes is the correct position on the question (Agee, 2009).

It is during the analytical phase that the qualitative researcher explores for themes and new theories about the research phenomenon from the data collected.  However, this phase is often prone to analysis bias.  Again, the beliefs and predispositions of the researcher about certain aspects of the research phenomenon might influence the analytical process (Smith &

Noble, 2014).  This is likely to introduce bias into the findings of the study even if the researcher was keen to identify and eliminate any bias in the other phases.

Smith and Noble (2014) argued that it might come naturally for the researcher to look for information from the data collected that confirms perspectives or explanations about specific research phenomenon that they hold.  It may also come naturally for them to look for information that explains the experiences that they have undergone personally.  It is also likely that qualitative researchers may tend to overlook information that is incongruent with what they believe.  All these practices will introduce bias into the findings.  It is the ethical responsibility of the qualitative researcher to follow the data patterns wherever they may lead.  It is also their ethical responsibility as qualitative researchers to report all findings whether they are consistent or not with their inclinations notwithstanding (O'Cathain, Murphy, & Nicholl, 2010; Anderson, 2010).

**Developing own competence in research methods**.  Developing own competence in methods describes the skills and know-how of the researcher for implementing the selected research designs in qualitative studies (Mooney-Somers & Olsen, 2017).  The qualitative researcher plays a significant role in the implementation of his study, arguably more than a quantitative researcher would be involved in certain studies as reported by Mooney-Somers and Olsen (2017).  This involvement brings into focus the competence of the qualitative researcher in the methods for use in the qualitative study.  According to Mooney-Somers and Olsen (2017), research competence is a prerequisite for performing human research.  It is an ethical requirement for the researcher to be competent in the methods.  This is because the studies involve human beings and even though the procedures may not be intrusive, they may lead to physical or emotional injuries.  The researcher will prevent this occurrence by reviewing the

sufficiency of the participant protection considerations with the aid of the Institutional Review

Board (IRB) and issuing an informed consent to the participants (Bridge, 2017).

**The competence in the selected methodology**.  More importantly, the competence

focuses on the methodological rigor and design rigor because the findings of the studies are

likely to be consumed by many other people as found by Mooney-Somers and Olsen (2017).

The findings might have policy implications.  Therefore, it is imperative that the researcher is

competent in the methods that he proposes to use.  In the event that the researcher does not have

the requisite competence and cannot develop it in time for the studies, Mooney-Somers and

Olsen (2017) recommended that such studies are supervised or overseen by people who are

competent in the proposed methods.

It is the responsibility of the IRB to assess the competence of the researchers in the

studies that are brought to them for approval.  The assessment of competence is rigorous in

quantitative research.  The same rigor is not seen when the IRB is assessing the competence of

the researcher in qualitative studies (Mooney-Somers & Olsen, 2017).

The competence of the researcher can be assessed by reviewing their formal

qualifications as they relate to training in relevant fields whether academically or professionally,

the claims to competence that are made by the researcher and the indicators or competence or

lack of when presenting the proposal (Mooney-Somers & Olsen, 2017).

**The competence of thematising**.  As part of their role in developing their competence in

methods, the qualitative researchers should develop or demonstrate competence in thematising.

Thematising as a competence influences all other processes in the qualitative study (Fink, 2000).

Thematic allows the researcher to determine the phenomenon to be studied, the justification for

focusing on the specific phenomenon, and the approach that will be used in studying the research

phenomenon. The information on the phenomenon to be studied, the justification for focusing on the specific phenomenon, and the approach that will be used in studying the research phenomenon form the background that informs research processes such as fieldwork, data collection, and reporting of findings (Fink, 2000).

**The competence of designing**. Qualitative researchers also need to develop or demonstrate competence in designing. This competence is important in outlining the methodological decisions and the design choices for the study. This competence assists the researcher in selecting the most appropriate methodologies and designs considering the aims of the study (Fink, 2000). Designing as a competence also enables the qualitative researcher to make appropriate decisions on other aspects of the methods such as the time schedule, the population to be studied, the approaches for deriving a sample from the study population, determining how to group the participants during the data collection and the data collection tools that will help generate the best quality of data to answer the corresponding research questions. Designing as a competence also enables the researcher to effectively determine the approaches moving forward and the tools to be used in the analysis of the qualitative data as well as decisions on the presentation of the data (Fink, 2000).

**The competence of interviewing**. Interviewing is one of the main methods through which qualitative researcher collect data. Competence in interviewing entails a thorough understanding of the various interviews, the use of tools and technology to accompany and complement the interviewing process and the cautions that a researcher must heed to collect quality data using this method of data collection as reported by Fink (2000). By the time the study is at the data collection phase of implementation, the researcher is aware of all the themes that he wants to explore in order to answer the research questions (Fink, 2000). These themes

are listed in a semi-structured interview schedule, a common tool used in qualitative research. Depending on the discretion of the researcher about their comprehensiveness, the interview schedule can either be structured or unstructured. Unstructured interview schedules are more appropriate in certain scenarios because they do not limit the researcher in the event that he feels more probing is required for in-depth data or new themes that need to be explored arise during the data collection phase (Fink, 2000).

In developing or demonstrating competence, the researcher should show insights on how to best ask questions in order to obtain quality data. Probing is a technique that a competent researcher should possess. It is used to prompt the participant for more information on specific themes where the researcher is not satisfied with the depth or breadth of the information already given (Fink, 2000). Competence in interviewing also entails the skill of asking interview questions without introducing bias by leading the participant on and framing the questions in a way that communicates to the participant the information needed. Competence in interviewing entails effective notetaking, attention to detail, and ably recording the interview to aid in transcription (Fink, 2000).

**The competence of transcribing**. Another skill in which a researcher in qualitative research should show competence is transcribing. While transcribing entails transforming audio information into typed text, it involves a lot of discretion on the transcriber. It involves technical skills whose perfect execution has an influence on the qualitative data analysis as argued by Bailey (2008). Competent researchers are able to determine the type and extent of detail to omit from the transcript, data interpretation and data representation (Bailey, 2008). The verbalizations of the information in the audio takes may need interpretation so that the transcript, while not copying all the verbalizing verbatim, presents the original meaning of the participant without

adulteration.  Therefore, competent researchers need the interpretive skills that are required to transform the audio tapes into logical transcripts that present the original message of the participants.

Davidson (2009) argued the transcription task is in actuality the first step in the analysis of the qualitative data.  Of note is the representation of the verbal data may differ from one qualitative study to another based on the aims of the studies and the methodological decisions made during the design phase.  Competent researchers should have the ability to make the distinction and have the ability to meet the different levels of details that are required for various types of methodological approaches.

**The competence of analyzing**.  Analyzing is another component in which the researcher should develop or demonstrate competence as a prerequisite for performing qualitative research. The analysis of qualitative data is done differently compared to the analysis of quantitative data. There may be no specific statistical tests that the researcher can apply in qualitative data as is the case in quantitative data as argued by Fink (2000).  However, the researcher still needs to determine how to proceed with the analysis of the data (Fink, 2000).  One of the aspects of importance is the coding of data.  Even though there are computer programs that can be employed to facilitate the coding process, the researcher is still responsible for defining the categories into which the data will be coded.

The researcher should show competence or develop proficiency in the proprietary software that is used in the analysis of the qualitative data.  The researcher should be able to contract someone with this competence so that irrespective of the knowledge of the researcher the data analysis is performed by a competent person and in line with the best practices in qualitative data analysis.

This phase of the implementation of qualitative research is prone to bias. Whether the data analysis is performed by the researcher or a third party contracted by the researcher, the analyst should exercise caution to identify any potential bias and eliminate it before it contaminates the outcomes of the analytical process (Smith & Noble, 2014).

**Validation of the reliability and validity of the research**. This is a task that is performed after the analysis of the data is completed. Verification, as the name suggests, entails checking that all that is expected of the analytical process is as it should be and that the aims and objectives that outlined at the beginning of the study have been satisfied. Additionally, the verification process is performed to ventilate on the methodological aspects of the study. It is important that the researcher can demonstrate or develop this competence prior to this phase of the study (Fink, 2000). This competence also incorporates aspects of the other competencies discussed above. One of the concerns of the researcher in performing this study is the reliability of the findings (Fink, 2000).

The researcher should be concerned with whether the findings of the analytical process are consistent with the data and what was hypothesized prior to the study. This is defined as reliability (Fink 2000). Inconsistencies should be checked, and any necessary corrective measure should be undertaken to ensure that if the analytical process was performed by someone else knowing what the analyst knew, the results would be very close to what they are presently (Fink, 2000).

The researcher during the verification process needs to ensure that the qualitative study investigated what it was designed to investigate during the proposal period. This is defined as validity (Fink, 2000). There should be a congruence between the objectives and research questions of the study and the findings. The verification process allows the researcher an

opportunity to determine that this is the case.  In the event the validity of the findings cannot be established, the researcher should backtrack the entire process to determine where the implementation process deviated from the plan established in the proposal stage.  The researcher can also initiate corrective measures at this point to rectify any errors or deviations that do not significantly affect the validity of the findings (Fink, 2000).

As part of the verification process, the researcher should also check for the generalizability of the findings.  Generalizability refers to the ability of the research findings, inferences and the conclusions drawn from a study performed using a sample population to be extended to the entire population from which the sample was drawn and other similar populations (Leung, 2015).  This is only plausible if the design of the study and the methodological decisions were rigorous enough to yield findings that are generalizable (Fink, 2000).  Fink (2000) argued that there is usually not documented evidence that the researchers performed the various processes discussed above for the purposes of verification.  However, competent researchers perform all these processes because it is their ethical responsibility as a researcher.  Even though documentation is not mandated, competent researchers will perform these processes because they are aware that they are directly linked to the quality of the data and outcomes of the study.

**The reporting of findings**.  The final competence of the researcher is reporting.  This is the final processes of the study.  It occurs after the analysis of the data.  The competence of the researcher entails his proficiency in writing a report detailing the findings of the study.  Even with well-analyzed results, the representation of the data requires refined skills in communication, particularly, of the written kind.  The influence of the researcher is significant in presenting the findings.  The manner in which the results are presented will determine their

palatability (Fink, 2000). Some of the best practices involve presenting the results in chronological order, probably based on the research questions earlier on during the developmental phase (Fink, 2000).

The researchers often quote responses given by the participants to illustrate various themes. The experience and judgment of the researcher come into influence when determining the respondents whose voice they will amplify. Their decisions to highlight the responses of particular participants are influenced by a variety of reasons. Irrespective of the justification for selecting a certain text for use in illustrating various themes, it is imperative that such texts add value to the report and contribute to communicating the findings of the study. The competence of the researcher is an influence in selecting the most appropriate texts that have the most effect on communicating the various themes as argued by Fink (2000).

**Collecting the data**. Another role of the researcher in qualitative research is collecting data. Unlike in quantitative studies where the researcher can hire research assistants to help in the collection of the data, the researcher collects the data personally in qualitative data. This is the aspect of qualitative research that predicts this role. The collection of data in qualitative research occurs as the researcher is interacting with the respondents as argued by Fink (2000). This creates a dependency between the data collection process and the researcher (Fink, 2000). It is for this reason that the researcher has a role to play in data collection.

Another role of the researcher in data collection is that unlike in quantitative research where the researcher collects data from large samples, the researcher in qualitative studies depends on the input of a small sample (Fink, 2000). Even so, the researcher still requires a large volume of data from the small sample in order to explore the research phenomenon comprehensively. As a result, it falls on the researcher to employ effective interviewing

techniques to elicit broad and deep information from the few participants so as to achieve saturation. In addition, the researcher has a further influence on how he interprets the information collected from the participants. In this way, the role of the researcher in the data collection exercise becomes even more significant as argued by Fink (2000). Depending on the data collection techniques that are for use in the qualitative study, the researcher might play multiple roles.

One of these roles is that of an interviewer. The researcher plays this role when the data collection tools include structured and semi-structured interviews. In this role, the researcher prepares the interview schedules to reflect the information that is required to answer the research questions adequately and comprehensively. When the proposal calls for the use of semi-structured interviews, the researcher allows for discretional questions to be asked during the interview process as reported by Singer and Couper (2017).

There are various issues of concern for the researcher during the data collection process. The manner in which the data are collected will influence the quality of the data that are collected by a researcher (Singer & Couper, 2017). The competencies of the researcher become influential when playing this role. Considering that the number of respondents is significantly smaller compared to quantitative research, the researcher's role becomes even more important because it is expected that he will collect sufficient data from the small sample. Gill, Stewart, Treasure, and Chadwick (2008) noted that the researcher in his role of collecting data could call on some of his competencies to facilitate the interviewers to offer more broad and in-depth information. Some of these skills include the use of a body language that is not only open but also communicates emotional neutrality. Singer and Couper (2017) recommended the use of

probing questions as well as open-ended questions to elicit the required information from the participants in both its breadth and depth.

The researcher can also assume the role of a moderator during the data collection process. A moderator is a person who while remaining impartial, guides the direction of a discussion by ensuring that all the points are discussed in depth while also ensuring representation of all the perspectives (Pickering & Watts, 2016). This is the case when the data collection approach requires the use of focus group discussions (Pickering & Watts, 2016).

The researcher has three roles in his capacity as a moderator. The first role is that of a facilitator. The two other roles are those of recording the proceedings and the analytical role. As a facilitator, the researcher ensures that the environment in which the focus group discussions will take place is conducive enough for the participants to talk freely and further enable the recording of quality audio for transcription. The researcher also monitors the direction of the discussions to ensure that they do not stagnate on one issue while also not progressing too hastily that the various themes that characterize the research phenomenon are not discussed adequately (Nyumba, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee, 2018). Nyumba et al. (2018) argued that the researcher in his role as a facilitator also infuses elements of an interviewer by posing questions to guide the participants of the focus group discussion to the areas where he feels more information is required.

In addition to his role as a facilitator, the researcher also records the proceedings of the focus group discussions while also monitoring their progress (Pickering & Watts, 2016). It is not foreseeable that the researcher will remember all the points that were deliberated upon in focus group discussions. While the researcher engages in note taking during the discussion, it is a good practice also to record an audio of the focus group discussion to help during the

transcription of the data and subsequent data analysis (Breen, 2006). The checking and recording roles are important in ensuring that the researcher facilitates the focus group discussion while also taking notes for a summary to be offered upon the completion of the focus group discussion.

The moderator also plays an analytical role. According to Prince and Davies (2001), the moderator is required as part of best practices to give a recap of the proceedings of the focus group discussion to the participants. This involves debriefing the entire session to the participants. The moderator is required to analyze the data collected within a short period of time in order to offer a recap. While the main analysis is to be performed after the entire data collection process is completed, the competencies of the researcher as an analyst come into influence here (Pickering & Watts, 2016).

**Analyzing the data**. The researcher in qualitative research also has a role in the analysis of data. The physical forms in which the data from a qualitative study is contained include audio recordings of the focus group discussions or the interviews, the notes were taken by the researcher during the data collection process, and the transcripts of the recordings taken by the researcher. The analysis of data entails deriving meaning from the information collected during the study. The researcher interprets the meaning that is encoded in the information given by the participants. To facilitate this process, the data are organized based on commonality. This is achieved using categories into which various data items are classified. It is the responsibility of the researcher to define the codes into which categorization will be done depending on the analytical approach to be used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

As part of this researcher's role in analyzing the data, the researcher also has the responsibility of selecting appropriate software to be used in coding the data. The use of

software is essential because the volume of the data collected at times is large depending on the nature of the research phenomenon. Manual coding of the data might be not only cumbersome but also prone to errors. The researcher is also responsible for selecting the data analysis approach to be used. Thematic analysis is a commonly used approach when analyzing qualitative data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Thematic analysis is an approach that has received criticism from different scholars. One of the criticisms as Nowell et al. (2017) highlighted is its shortcomings in trustworthiness, particularly, because the researchers are not transparent on the approaches that they used in analyzing the data. In the event the researcher elects to use the thematic approach to analyze the data, he has a responsibility to ensure that he incorporates transparency, identifies and eliminates bias, and incorporates ethical practices into the data analysis process (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The researcher can elect to use the content analysis approach. This is an analytical approach where the researcher makes inferences from the data collected by interpreting the context in which it is presented (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach offers a different dynamic from the thematic analysis. While the thematic analysis is geared towards qualifying, Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (2013) found that content analysis tends towards quantifying. Depending on the competencies of the researcher, either approach should be applied properly in order to yield findings that are not only valid but also reliable. In recognition of the influence of personal beliefs, the researcher has a role in identifying any sources of bias both internally and externally and eliminate them so that the findings are sound and reflect consistency with the perspectives of the study population.

**Presentation of the findings**.  The researcher in qualitative research also has the role of the disseminating the findings of the study.  This is the phase in the implementation of the research protocol that comes after writing the report.  The findings of a study are consumed and are significant to a larger audience.  The researcher has the role of determining the best approaches to presenting the findings of the study so that they can read the intended audience.  There are various alternatives that the researchers can explore when presenting the data.  While most of the findings are presented in written reports, the researchers can also explore the appropriateness of poster presentations as well as oral presentations of the findings of the study (Shephard, 2005).

Depending on the context in which the study is performed, the presentation of the findings can be done in various forums.  Researchers performing professional studies can be present their findings in seminars, conferences, and other appropriate professional forums.  Researchers performing studies as part of their partial requirements for the award of certain degrees can present their findings in front of panels convened by their university departments (Shephard, 2005).

**Participants**

This section discusses the sample population, the methods of identifying and gaining access to the participants, and protecting the participants from potential harm.

**Sample population**.  The participants in this research are the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  The operational definition of a small business that was used in this case is an enterprise employing a minimum of one hundred workers and a maximum of five hundred people excluding the owner enterprise and his unsalaried family members (Small Business Administration, 2016; Bridge, 2017).  However, this qualitative study considered

businesses that have less than 100 employees because of the unavailability of businesses that are large enough to employ a minimum of one hundred people.  The potential participants were selected from members of the Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce.  The rationale for this inclusion criterion was that proprietors who have subscribed for membership in the local chambers of commerce have active participation in the activities in the local community as reported by Bridge (2017).

According to Lacho and Brockmann (2011), small businesses that subscribe to local chambers of commerce benefit by promoting their businesses and brands to fellow members. Additionally, they have access to increased opportunities for networking as well as a pool of resources they can utilize to promote their businesses.

Part of the rationale for the inclusion criteria was that proprietors of small businesses who subscribed to the local chamber of commerce are likely to be using social media as part of the marketing resources for their small enterprises.

**Methods to identify and gain access to the participants**.  The selection of participants from members of the local chamber of commerce was also justified by the arguments of Ming-Hsien, Chang-Tang, Ya-Yun, and Chin-Chuan (2014) that when using a case study research design, the selection of the participants should be from concentrated populations so as to offer consistency to the measurement of the impact of the research phenomenon.  It is for this reason that during their study to how social media affected derived customer value, Ming-Hsien et al. (2014) used a sample selected from one travel agency.

Similarly, participant selection practices have also been shown by Mishra, Mishra, and Rawat (2015) who selected participants from one university in a study where they were interested in the use and impact of social media among college students.  Citing practices in the

two studies, the argument for a concentrated population and the inclusion of membership in the local chamber of commerce as inclusion criteria for the qualitative study was justified.

Another aspect of the potential participants of interest is the number of sample size; the guiding argument in the determination of the sample size for the qualitative study was suggested by Crouch and McKenzie (2006). They argue that the maximum number of respondents from which researchers using a qualitative research methodology should collect data is 20. A sample size larger than 20 would undermine the saturation and researcher relationships.

Morse (1994) argued for the use of at least six respondents as the least sample size. Perspectives from Boddy (2016) regarding the saturation of research showed that this aspect could be achieved when in-depth interviews are performed on 12 participants drawn from homogenous populations. In the context of the qualitative study, the inclusion of membership in the local chamber of commerce as part of the inclusion criteria ensured that the study population was concentrated. Therefore, the selection of participants should yield a sample that reflects saturation. In this regard, the study used 20 participants.

The accessible population in the qualitative study was comprised of proprietors, managers, or other employees who are tasked with maintaining the social media presence of small enterprises. This is because they are the population which possessed the knowledge of the social customer relationship management practices, the benefits of using social media, and the approaches to customer engagement (Bridge, 2017). The participants were drawn from a random subsample using the stratified sampling method (Bridge, 2017). Creswell (2014) argued that this approach enhanced the accuracy of data by ensuring the study sampled reflects all the elements in the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

**Protecting participants from potential harm**.  Ethics in research is concerned with much more than observing integrity in the implementation of the research protocol; it is also concerned with protecting the participants from any form of harm (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2000).  There are various ethical concerns in studies dealing with human participants.  The definition of harm does not just encompass the physical harm; it also entails emotional harm or any other form of harm that might result from the implementation of diverse research protocols.  Divulging business secrets that have been entrusted to a researcher during the progression of a study might not result in any physical harm to the owner or shareholders in a business.  However, it might result in economic harm if these secrets are leveraged by the competitors of the business during competition.  This is an outcome that is undesirable in research.  The researcher bears the responsibility of ensuring that his participants do not come to any harm as Orb et al. (2000) reported.

One of the potential sources of harm in qualitative studies is the development of very close relationships between the researcher and the participants.  This occurs when the researchers prompt the participants to divulge personal information.  While it was not foreseeable considering the nature of this qualitative study and the subject of inquiry, a competent researcher should always be prepared in the event such issues arise.  Some of the ethical risks to which the researcher exposes the participants is the risk of feeling exploited for their personal experiences (Mellick & Fleming, 2010; Morrison, Gregory, & Thibodeau, 2012).

The participants could also feel that they were misunderstood by the researcher (Birch & Miller, 2000).  It is the ethical responsibility of the researcher to make contingencies when exploring sensitive issues.  In studies where sensitive issues are likely to arise during the data collection phase, the researcher has a responsibility to provide support mechanisms or assist the

participants that need emotional support.  When this is not possible, the researchers should offer support to the participants (Hewitt, 2007; Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012).

The researcher in this qualitative study did not anticipate that there would be such adverse emotional reactions because the subject of inquiry is on social customer relationship management.  However, the researcher still maintained contingencies in order to ensure the sufficiency of the ethical considerations for the study as recommended by Kendall and Halliday (2014).

The researcher maintained contingencies by retaining a contact number for a health professional, particularly a psychologist to which he would refer any participants who developed adverse emotional reactions during the data collection process (Richards & Schwartz, 2002).  As part of developing the competencies for the study, the researcher familiarized with proper interviewing skills to collect in-depth data without necessarily eliciting adverse emotional reactions from the participants, even in areas where there might be sensitivities.

Another issue of concern with regard to protecting the participants of this qualitative study from any harm was maintaining confidentiality.  Considering that the study population for this qualitative study comprised the proprietors of small businesses or the agents who have been contracted to run the operations of the small businesses on behalf of the proprietors or the shareholders, it was foreseeable that they may divulge information that they would prefer remained confidential, particularly, any business data (O'Keefe & Shlomo, 2014).  The identifying information of the businesses was replaced with generic numbers so that they are not easily identified by any members of the research team.  The identifying codes were retained throughout the study, and only the principal researcher knew the business name for which each code stood.

According to Kaiser (2009), deductive disclosure should be a concern for researchers in qualitative studies because the characteristics of the participants of a study might make them easily identifiable, especially when their characteristics are included in the reports issued at the end of the studies. It is a common practice for researchers to include in-depth descriptions of the participants of the study when writing the study reports. This practice makes deductive disclosure an issue of concern.

This issue might result in an ethical dilemma where the desire of the researcher to protect the identity of the participants of the study is pitted against a desire to include thorough descriptions of the participants from whom the researcher collected the data. This is an issue of concern, not just for the participants in this study, but also for academia because deductive disclosure might undermine the public trust that is afforded to researchers (Kaiser, 2009). The researcher in this study protected the identities of the proprietors of the small businesses who were sampled to participate in the study if they expressed a desire for anonymity. The researcher included a note in the report to indicate why some descriptions of the participants may be lacking details on the identifying information of participants.

The researcher informed the participants that the anonymity would be maintained throughout all the stages of the data collection and analysis when issuing an informed consent. Informed consent is a concept that is central to studies that involve human beings as participants (Corti, Day, & Backhouse, 2000). It is important for the participants to be informed of all the risks and benefits to which they are exposed by participating in a study. This is one of the ways through which the researcher protects the participants of the study from all types of harm (Nusbaum, Douglas, Damus, Paasche-Orlow, & Estrella-Luna, 2017).

The informed consent concept requires that potential participants are informed of the details of the study as a prerequisite for agreeing to participate. The researcher in this qualitative study informed the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia of the aims of the study, the information that the researcher would collect from them, and the uses of the information collected.

The researcher also informed the potential participants of the risks to which they would be exposed by agreeing to participate in the qualitative study. The explanation of the risks also included the risks to their small businesses that might result from divulging information about their practices relating to social customer relationship management. The researcher also explained the contingencies in place to identify and minimize the risks. The researcher explained the measures for ensuring the confidentiality of the information divulged during the data collection phase as Nusbaum et al. (2017) argued.

Part of this explanation included the right they reserve to request for anonymity. The researcher explained that identifying information would not be included in the final report of the study. The researcher also explained that the information gathered from the participants would not be divulged to other third parties or anyone else who is not part of the research team. The researcher only included the participants who gave informed consent in the sample from whom the information will be collected (Bryne, 2001).

The researcher in this qualitative study assessed whether the dynamics of the research would change during the data collection stages. Bryne (2001) recommended that researchers in qualitative studies should give progressive, informed consent to the participants when the dynamics that characterize the research process change. The aim of issuing a progressive informed consent is to ensure that the participants are informed of any new risks that result from

the changes in the research dynamics. The continued participation in the qualitative study should benefit from a knowledge of how any changes in the research process will affect them from a risk and benefits perspective. Using this new information, the participants can decide whether to continue their participation in this qualitative study or decline to do so.

**Research Method and Design**

This section of this research protocol outlined and discussed the research methodology and the research design that was used to determine if the use of social customer relationship by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia has any effects on their business success. This section of this dissertation also provided justification for the choice of the research methodology and research design by citing merits as discussed in the literature and to explain how the methodological and design choices contributed uniquely to meet the research aims and objectives.

**Discussion of the method**. The research methodology selected for exploring the use of social customer relationship by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia was the qualitative research methodology. This is a methodology that facilitates the collection of non-numerical data and its use in categorizing and comprehending various aspects of a research phenomenon (Stake, 2010). It is a methodology that is commonly used in research. The decision to use the qualitative research methodology was influenced by factors such as the need for an in-depth understanding of the use of social customer relationship among the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia and the need to explore the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of their study population on the use of new media for marketing purposes.

There is a need for an in-depth understanding of the use of social customer relationship among the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.

This research attempted to determine why despite the limited budgets with which the proprietors of the small businesses operate and the fact that social customer relationship management fits into those budgets, its utilization is low among many small businesses (Bridge, 2017). The low utilization of customer relationship management that was noted by Bridge (2017) underlies the importance of this practice in forging strong and sustainable customer relationships that not only lead to an enhanced customer experience but also contribute to the improved competitiveness of the businesses.

There is a need to determine what factors influence the failure to use social media for the purposes of customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses. Bridge (2017) suggested that the reason for the failure to use these platforms may be a lack of awareness of the potential utilization social media in a business context and for purposes of social customer relationship management. Harrigan and Miles (2014) also suggested that the failure to use social media might be due to a lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses as to why customer relationship management as a practice is important for their small businesses.

The failure to use social media is, perhaps, the result of the knowledge by the proprietors of the small businesses that social customer relationship management as a practice has no significant influence on the ability of the small businesses to attract and retain the customers. All these factors require an in-depth inquiry into this research study. These factors require a methodology that will allow the researcher to collect in-depth information from the study population and analyze it to understand why they are not using a practice that is theoretically and

demonstrably important for their small businesses, according to Harrigan and Miles (2014), and one that fits into their limited budgets.

The qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher to collect the data to address the factors listed earlier (Yin, 2009). This qualitative research methodology was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to collect in-depth data from the participants. Using the analytical approaches of the qualitative research method, the researcher was able to understand the research phenomenon by examining real data collected from the study population. The qualitative research methodology was also appropriate for this study because it facilitated the researcher to determine the approaches that the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia use towards social customer relationship management. The researcher could also compare whether the use of these methods by the proprietors places them at a competitive advantage compared to other proprietors of small businesses in the area who do not use social customer relationship management.

The researcher needed to sample and analyze the data collected on small businesses rather than exploring for the effect of any factors that have already been reported in existing literature to explain the failure to use social customer relationship management (Bridge, 2017).

The qualitative research methodology was appropriate for this need because the method allows the researcher to collect data on subjective variables from the perspective of the proprietors of the small businesses (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The implication is that even though the researcher might have developed hypotheses from literature about the failure to use the social media for the purposes of social customer relationship management that are developed from existing knowledge, the qualitative research methodology allowed the researcher to determine

whether there are other explaining factors that are not contained in the current body of knowledge.

Adams et al. (2012) argued that analyzing the perspectives of the proprietors of the small businesses is important in gaining insights into their failure to use social customer relationship management and the factors that motivate such trends.  The qualitative research methodology enabled the researcher to use specific data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews among others that allowed the collection of data from the participants on their perspectives regarding the use of social media for customer relationship management practices without being inhibited by notions and hypotheses developed from the existing body of knowledge.

The qualitative research methodology has been applied with relative success in the marketing field (Bridge, 2017).  Other researchers looking into different aspects of social customer relationship management with a focus on the small business sector have used the qualitative research methodology effectively.  In justifying the use of the qualitative methodology in his study on the social media strategies that the proprietors of small restaurants employ in their businesses, Bennett (2017) cited a need for in-depth information and the fact that the qualitative research methodology allowed him to acquire and analyze that information from his study population.

Parker (2014) recommended the use of the qualitative research methodology in studies where the researcher does not need to formulate and test hypotheses as a prerequisite for understanding the research problem.  Parker (2014) also recommended the use of the qualitative research methodology in studies where the researcher needs to collect and analyze information on the perspectives of the participants in order to advance the existing knowledge on a specific research phenomenon and in studies where the researcher does not have access to large samples

of participants or in instances where addressing the research problems does not require data to be collected from large samples of the study population.

Stebner et al. (2017) used the qualitative research methodology in their study because of the need to collect information on the experiences, perceptions, and the perspectives of their study population regarding the use of the innovative and disruptive digital communication channels in the marketing of small businesses. The needs identified by Bennett (2017) and Stebner et al. (2017) above and the conditions set by Parker (2014) for the use of the qualitative research methodology all characterized this study. For these reasons, the qualitative research methodology was appropriate for this study.

**Discussion of design**. The selected research design for this qualitative study was the case study research design. This design was selected after consideration of other alternatives including narrative, ethnography, case studies, phenomenology, and grounded theory research designs. The selection of the case study research designs was based on a consideration of the needs of the researcher for in-depth data in answering the research questions. Creswell et al. (2007) recommended the use of this research design when the researchers want to be involved in the data collection process as well as collect in-depth data as a prerequisite for answering the research questions. Creswell et al. (2007) argued that the case study research design facilitates the collection of in-depth data by allowing the researcher to pose descriptive questions to the participants on the specific aspects of the research problem where he needs more insight through in-depth data.

The ability of the case study research design to allow a close examination of the use of a research phenomenon within defined contexts was a particular attribute of the design that influenced its selection as the research design appropriate for this qualitative research.

According to Zainal (2007), case study research designs limit the number of people or events that are studied as well as the context in which the data are interpreted to allow the researcher to delve deeper into the variables that characterize the study problem and the manner in which they relate with one another.  This attribute of the research design benefited this qualitative study because it allowed the researcher to use a small but significant number of proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia to understand the use of social customer relationship management in their businesses.  A comprehensive contextual analysis of the research problem allowed the researcher to gain insights into the use of social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia, the influence that these practices have on the performance of the small businesses, the influence of the social customer relationship management practices in enabling the businesses in attracting and retaining customers, and the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on operational aspects of the small businesses.

The selection of the case study research design was also justified because it complemented certain important aspects of the selected research methodology.  The choice of the qualitative research design was partly justified by the fact that it allowed the researcher to explore the perceived values of the proprietors of small businesses by posing descriptive questions.  This is also part of the reason that the case study research design was selected for this qualitative study.  According to Bridge (2017), the case study research design enables the research to gain the desired depth in the information gathered and the insights gained from the information by posing descriptive and open-ended questions to the participants.  This merit of the case study research design is facilitated by the utilization of data collection tools such as semi-structured interviews (Bridge, 2017).

**Summary of research method and design**.  This qualitative study used a qualitative research methodology that was complemented by a case study research design.  The qualitative research methodology was selected as an appropriate methodology for this study because it provided the framework for the researcher to gather in-depth information from the participants. The qualitative research methodology also provided a framework using which the researcher could gain insights on the use of social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia (Yin, 2009).  The qualitative research methodology is a methodology that has been used in other studies in the past on digital communication channels and their use in market communication as well as other areas of marketing by researchers such as Parker (2014) and Bennett (2017).

This qualitative used a case study research design.  This decision was made after consideration of other possible research designs such as narrative, ethnography, phenomenology, and grounded theory.  The selection of the case study research design was justified by the fact that it facilitated the collection and analysis of in-depth data in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the use of social customer relationship management by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  This research design was also selected because it provides a framework for the researcher to explore the perspectives, experiences, and perceived value of the proprietors of the small businesses on the use of social customer relationship management (Creswell et al., 2007).

## Population and Sampling

This section discussed the study population.  The discussion focused on their location, the reason for their section, and how they were sampled.

**Discussion of population**.  The study population, in this case, was the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  The operation definition of a small business to be used in this case is an enterprise employing a maximum of one hundred workers excluding the owner enterprise and his unsalaried family members (Small Business Administration, 2016; Bridge, 2017).  The potential participants were selected from members of the Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce.

The Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce comprises of chambers of commerce from three constituent counties (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  Despite a presence of four counties in Southern West Virginia, two of the chambers of commerce, Greater Bluefield and Princeton Mercer, are both in Mercer County.  One of the four constituent chambers of commerce from which the study population of this qualitative study was drawn is the Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  This is an organization whose formation was aimed at promoting the professional and economic development of the businesses located in Princeton and Mercer County.  The organization was also formed to facilitate those who wanted to start businesses in the county so that their enterprises would not only thrive but also remain in the county (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

The second constituent chamber of commerce from which the study population was drawn is the Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  This is membership organization whose aim is to offer leadership and vision both to the community in Greater Bluefield and its environs as well as the businesses operating in the locality (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

The study population was also drawn from a third constituent chamber of commerce in the name of Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.). This organization aims to contribute to the building of a vibrant business community within Beckley-Raleigh County by offering public awareness programs, advocacy and involvement in the development of policies. The Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce also offers information on businesses and the business environment, retirement, relocation and tourism (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

The final constituent chamber of commerce from which the study population was drawn was the Fayette County Chamber of Commerce. This organization represents the interests of the businesses operating within Fayette County (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

It was important to draw samples from each of these constituent chambers of commerce so as to allow the researcher to gain perspectives from around the greater Southern West Virginia. Additionally, the proprietors of the small businesses in the three counties are exposed to different operating conditions (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.). The researcher can only determine whether the operating conditions have an influence on the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management when he samples and collects data from the proprietors of small businesses in each of the chambers of commerce that constitute the Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce.

The rationale for this inclusion criterion was that proprietors who had subscribed for membership in the local chamber of commerce have active participation in the activities in the local community. According to Lacho and Brockmann (2011), small businesses that subscribe to local chambers of commerce benefit by promoting their businesses and brands to fellow

members.  Additionally, they had access to increased opportunities for networking as well as a pool of resources they can utilize to promote their businesses.  Part of the rationale for the inclusion criteria was that proprietors of small businesses who subscribed to the local chamber of commerce are likely to be using social media as part of the marketing resources for their small enterprises (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

The benefits highlighted above are among the benefits available to the members of the Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce. Some of these benefits are in the form of marketing services.  The Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce bureau offers its members advertising opportunities to particular markets (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  The bureau also performs marketing research and offers the information on the insights gained to its members through its website and other dissemination channels such as the newsletters (Luigi et al., 2011).  The Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce bureau also offers public relations benefits, particularly to the businesses operating in the leisure, travel and tourism and those offering professional services.

The Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce bureau also offers its members educational and information support to help them get a higher return on the investment that they commit to marketing their businesses.  It is this aspect that justified the inclusion of businesses who subscribe to any of the four constituent chambers of commerce listed earlier.  The informational and educational support offered by the bureau is likely to have included information on customer relationship management and probably, the use of social customer relationship management.

The selection of participants from members of the local chamber of commerce was also justified by the arguments of Ming-Hsien et al. (2014) that when using a case study research

design, the selection of the participants should be from concentrated populations so as to offer consistency to the measurement of the impact of the research phenomenon.  It was for this reason that during their study of how social media affected derived customer value, Ming-Hsien et al. (2014) used a sample selected from one travel agency.  Similar, participant selection practices have also been shown by Mishra et al. (2015) who selected participants from one university in a study where they were interested in the use and impact of social media among college students. By citing practices in the two studies, the argument for a concentrated population and the inclusion of membership in the local chamber of commerce as inclusion criteria for this qualitative study was justified.

**Discussion of sampling**.  The section below discusses the sample size, accessible population, and sampling procedures.

**Sample size**.  Another aspect of the potential participants of interest was the number of sample size.  The guiding arguments in the determination of the sample size for this qualitative study were made by Crouch and McKenzie (2006).  They argued that the maximum number of respondents from which researchers using a qualitative research methodology should collect data is 20.  A sample size larger than 20 would undermine the saturation and researcher relationships. Morse (1994) argued for the use of at least six respondents as the least sample size.  Perspectives from Boddy (2016) regarding the saturation of research showed that this aspect could be achieved when in-depth interviews are performed on 12 participants drawn from homogenous populations.  In the context of the qualitative study, the inclusion of membership in the local chamber of commerce as part of the inclusion criteria ensures that the study population is concentrated (Parker, 2014).  Therefore, the selection of participants should yield a sample that reflects saturation.  While 12 participants would have been appropriate, it was also important to

consider that there are four constituent chambers of commerce from which the sample was drawn. The upper limit of 20 participants offered the researcher a better opportunity to collect data that is representative of the perspectives of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.

**Accessible population**. The accessible population in the qualitative study was comprised of proprietors, managers, or other employees who are tasked with maintaining the social media presence of the small enterprises (Malmir et al., 2014). This is because the population who possess the knowledge of the social customer relationship management practices, the benefits of using social media, and the approaches to customer engagement (Bridge, 2017). It was necessary for the researcher to collect information from the people who either own the businesses or are responsible for the decisions on the use of social customer relationship management. These are the people who possess the information on the benefits of using social media for customer relationship management, the impact it has on the success of the businesses (Rodriquez & Honeycutt, 2011; Rodriquez, Peterson, & Krishan, 2012; Garrido-Moreno et al., 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2014). According to Bridge (2017), all the employees are not expected to possess information on the use of social media for the purposes of social customer relationship management. The researcher, therefore, needed to identify the people within the small businesses who possess this information for inclusion in the sample from whom the information will be collected.

**Sampling procedures**. The participants were drawn from a random subsample using the stratified sampling method (Bridge, 2017). Creswell et al. (2007) and Creswell (2014) argued that this approach enhanced the accuracy of data by ensuring the study sampled reflected all the elements in the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The stratification of the sampling approach was

important because the researcher aimed to ensure an equal representation of the four constituent chambers of commerce in the Southern West Virginia Chamber of Commerce. The stratification approach allowed the researcher to use the four constituent chambers of commerce as distinct cohorts to which a specified number of respondents was assigned for identification and inclusion into the list of participants from whom the researcher will collect the data (Rainbolt & Dwyer, 2014). This aspect allowed a targeted representation of the participants (Hartas, 2010).

The researcher drew five proprietors of small businesses each from a sampling frame drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce. The preparation of the sampling frame from each of the four county chambers of commerce was done using an inclusion and exclusion criteria. One inclusion and exclusion criteria were that the businesses that were eligible for selection had to be members of the respective chambers of commerce. Additionally, the businesses that were eligible for selection into the sampling frame were those employing a maximum of one hundred workers excluding the owner enterprise and his unsalaried family members (Small Business Administration, 2016; Bridge, 2017).

From this sampling frame, the researcher randomly selected five businesses from each of the four county chambers of commerce. The researcher created a sampling frame of all the eligible small businesses from each of the four county chambers of commerce. Eligibility, in this case, was determined by the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher then assigned each of the eligible businesses in each sampling frame a number. It was important that the numbering was done progressively. The researcher used a random number generator from Microsoft Excel to generate a random number between the smallest and largest numbers

assigned to the small businesses in each sampling frame. The small business to which the generated random number was assigned was selected as the first participant. The researcher performed this task enough times to generate a total of five participants from each of the four sampling frames that represented each of the four selected county chambers of commerce.

This brought a total of 20 participants from whom the researcher collected the data. The researcher contacted the proprietors of the selected businesses to determine their willingness to participate in the study (Moser & Korstjens, 2016). The researcher administered a screening interview to determine the eligibility of the selected participants to participate in the study using the screening interview guide provided in the appendices. The researcher replaced any selected participants who were not eligible to participate in this study using a similar procedure. The researcher replaced the businesses whose proprietors declined to participate in this qualitative study from the sampling frames of the respective county chambers of commerce (Melham et al., 2014).

**Summary of population and sampling**. The proprietors of the small businesses from whom the data were collected were drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce. The accessible population comprised the proprietors of the business or other people who were tasked with making decisions on the use of social media in business communication, particularly, its use in customer relationship management. The researcher created a sampling frame consisting of all the eligible businesses. From this sampling frame, the researcher selected five participants from each of the three counties.

**Data Collection**

The study used qualitative data collected from a total of 20 residents (Boddy, 2016), equally drawn from the proprietors of small businesses each listed in a sampling frame drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.). This section describes the data collection instruments that the researcher used to collect data from the identified proprietors, the data collection techniques that the researcher used to collect good quality and in-depth data to facilitate the answering of the research questions, and the data organization techniques that were used after the data collection phase.

**Instruments**. The main data collection instrument used in this qualitative study was the semi-structured interview schedule. A semi-structured interview schedule has predetermined questions, of both the open and close-ended variety, which guide a researcher when interviewing a participant. The themes contained in the questions used in the semi-structured interview scheduled were arranged in a systematic manner so that they can facilitate the collection of coherent and exhaustive data. The questions were also interspersed with guides on the areas to probe so that the researcher could collect in-depth data. The semi-structured interview guide used in this qualitative study was highly scripted so as to guide the researcher in all the areas where data were required in order to answer the research questions comprehensively. The researcher still had the prerogative to explore any emergent themes that may be important for the qualitative study even if they were not included in the initial script for the semi-structured interview (Bridge, 2017).

The semi-structured interview schedule used in this qualitative study contained 20 questions. The 20 questions were designed to collect data on seven themes that characterized the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management in small businesses (Bridge, 2017). The seven themes included online communities, social media support, the capture of information, the use of the information captured, the orientation of customer relationship, social media data, and the communication with customers (Bridge, 2017). The seven themes were derived from a quantitative study performed by Harrigan and Miles (2014). The researchers identified the seven themes as the factors that characterized the use of social media for the purposes of social customer relationship management in the context of small businesses.

The 20 questions included in the semi-structured interview schedule prompted the respondents for data from the seven themes. They were designed to allow the respondents to give the responses in the context of their businesses.

The semi-structured interview schedule is a data collection tool that has been used by Pandey and Chawla (2016) in marketing research. The study by Pandey and Chawla (2016) was qualitative in nature. The qualitative study focused on the effects of the online environment for e-retailers. Pandey and Chawla (2016) found that the semi-structured interview schedule was an appropriate and effective tool for collecting data from the study participants because it allowed them to give their accounts of the experiences within the context of their businesses.

Part of the tools also included a screening interview guide. This tool was designed to help the researcher apply an inclusion and exclusion criteria to determine the participants identified from the sampling frame who were eligible for participating in the study. The

screening interview guide contained seven questions that were posed to the prospective participants for the study.

**Data collection techniques**. The collection of the data from the respondents was done by the researcher using a face-to-face approach. This is an approach where the researcher met with the participant physically and directly communicate with the participant (Braun, Clarke, & Gray, 2017). The face-to-face approach was selected over other virtual interview methods because it offered the researcher access to the nonverbal signals given by the respondent. The nonverbal signals of the respondent were important for the collection of data because they helped the researcher determine whether further probative questions were needed and when to rephrase a question to help the respondent better understand the information required of them (Hecht, 2010).

The underlying assumption in the use of a semi-structured interview schedule in collecting qualitative data was the interviewee must understand the questions that were posed to them and the interviewer must show sensitivity to any apparent differences in the way the interviewees comprehend the subject areas on which the interview is based (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The implications of this assumption on the data collection technique in this qualitative study were that the researcher would approach the subject area of social customer relationship management from the perspective of the interviewee (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

This approach facilitated a participatory interview in which the researcher and the interviewee engaged in a complex interpersonal talk through which questions were posed, and answers generated (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The researcher used the scheduled probes that were indicated in the semi-structured interview schedule whenever issues of interest emerged from the responses of the interviewee. Unscheduled probes were also allowed if, in the judgement of the

researcher, they contributed to eliciting a more comprehensive narrative about a specific aspect from the interviewee (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

The researcher took notes of the questions in the semi-structured interview schedule that had been posed to the respondent (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).  However, the researcher relied on audio data recording to avoid the distractions and unreliability that are associated with taking notes during an interview (Harrell, Bradley, Rand Corporation, & National Defense Research Institute, 2009).  An audio recording of the data helps in the management of the data after the data collection exercise (Sutton & Austin, 2015).  The audio recordings were particularly essential when preparing transcripts to be used during the qualitative analysis of the interview data (Tessier, 2012).  Nonetheless, the researcher still made field notes that were used to provide a context for the recorded audio data (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

**Data organization techniques**.  The data that the researcher collected during the interviews were contained in a portable digital audio recorder.  Depending on the length of the interviews, the researcher banked the data in a laptop computer to allow more space in the digital recorder for further recordings.  All the audio files containing data from individual proprietors of small businesses were stored in one folder.  Storing the data in individual folders was beneficial because it prevented scenarios where the data files mixed.  To enable better traceability of the files, the researcher created a code for each file.  Each code was assigned to the individual respondents.  The file name featured that code.  The code was also used in naming the folders on which the individual data files were saved.  The data files were stored in a laptop which was protected by a password.  The main file folder was password-protected using the folder lock program.  The utilization of a two-step authentication system was recommended by Fatima (2011) in order to protect the information.

**Summary of data collection**.  The researcher collected data from 20 proprietors of small businesses from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce.  The researcher used the semi-structured interview schedule as the main data collection instrument.  The data collection instrument contained 20 questions that were designed to prompt for information on seven themes: (a) online communities, (b) social media support, (c) the capture of data, (d) the use of the data captured, (e) the orientation of customer relationship, (f) social media data, and (g) the communication with customers.  The researcher collected the information in a face-to-face meeting with the respondents.  The data were recorded using a portable digital audio recorder.  The data files for individual respondents were saved in different folders in a secure laptop.

## Data Analysis

The data analyzed were the qualitative data that were collected from a total of 20 residents (Boddy, 2016), equally drawn from the proprietors of small businesses each listed in a sampling frame drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  This section described the data collection process that was utilized in drawing the knowledge from the data collected from the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.  This section discussed the data analysis tool that was utilized in the coding and analysis of the data.  The part also discussed the anticipated themes.  The discussion on the anticipated themes included the individual elements that characterized themes that the researcher identified during the analytical process.

**Data analysis tools and technique**. The data that were collected from the 20 proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia was stored in the form of audio files. To facilitate the analysis of the qualitative data, the first step in the analysis of the data was the transcription of the audio files into written text (Bailey, 2008). The researcher required competencies in data transcription such as judgment, data interpretation, and data representation (Skukauskaite, 2012).

Judgment is the technical ability to determine the amount of detail that is required in the transcript (Bailey, 2008). Some non-verbal dimensions captured in the audio files needed to be omitted, while others needed to be included in the transcript.

Data interpretation is the technical ability to understand the difference in meaning when the interviewee verbalizes statements that have different meanings (Bailey, 2008). The researcher relied on the field notes to offer a context using which to understand the meaning behind the verbalizations of the interviewee (Tessier, 2012).

Data representation is the technical ability to represent the verbalizations that the interviewees made in the form of a legible text (Bailey, 2008). The interviewees might use informal language when communicating with the prompts. Data representation as a technical ability entails understanding the verbalizations as they are uttered and transforming them into a readable text to aid in the coding and analysis of the data.

The second step in the analysis of the qualitative data in this study was the coding process. In this process, the qualitative data in the transcripts was broken down into categories based on the specific setting in which the words, sentences and entire paragraphs were said (Ngulube, 2015). The coding process is important in making the meanings that underlie the qualitative data that were collected from the proprietors of the small businesses more apparent for the research during the other stages of data analysis (Theron, 2015). The codes assigned to

various sections of the data were determined by the researcher based on the interest in the data as guided by the research questions, the context of this qualitative study as highlighted in the research topic and the nature of the data contained in the research transcripts.

The coding of the data was automated using the QDA Miner software; software that has been used by Bridge (2017) in analyzing qualitative data in marketing research. The 20 transcripts containing the qualitative data collected from the proprietors of small businesses were exported to the QDA Miner software. The software allocated appropriate codes to the written text in each of the 20 transcripts. The researcher reviewed the codes for appropriateness considering the research questions that guided this qualitative research (Arora & Stoner 2009). The QDA Miner is a software that has been shown to be effective and with a range of functions that facilitate the coding of qualitative data (LaPan, 2013).

The third step in the analysis of data in this study included the analysis of the coded data with the aim of answering the research questions. The analysis of data was done using thematic analysis; a technique used commonly in analyzing qualitative research where the researcher identifies, evaluates and reports the themes occurring in the interview transcripts (Jugder, 2016). The approach helped generate insightful answers to the research questions that guided this qualitative study (Jugder, 2016). The thematic analysis method was also appropriate for this qualitative study because it allowed the analysis of data from two approaches.

The first approach utilized in analyzing the qualitative data contained in the interview transcripts was the data-driven approach (Creswell, 2007). This is an analytical approach where the analysis is performed inductively through the review of the various categories into which the data in the interview transcripts are coded (Thomas, 2003). The second approach through which the qualitative data were analyzed was through the review of the research question to determine

whether the qualitative data gathered from the proprietors of the small business was sufficient to answer the research questions exhaustively and whether it was consistent with the existing knowledge (Bazeley, 2009).

The analysis identified seven anticipated themes. The seven themes were identified by Harrigan and Miles (2014) in a study in which they identified the factors that underpin the activities of small businesses towards social customer relationship management. The seven themes that were explored during the analysis of the qualitative data contained in the interview transcripts included online communities, social media support, the capture of information, the use of the information captured, the orientation of customer relationship, social media data and the communication with customers (Bridge, 2017).

**Online communities**. Online communities are one of the factors that were identified by Harrigan and Miles (2014). Some of the elements of this theme that were anticipated during the analysis of the qualitative data included the online communities in which the small businesses operate were built in conjunction with the customers or were owned by the customers (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). The researcher also checked for information on whether the online communities in which the small businesses participated were constructed in conjunction with the customers or were wholly owned by the customers, were critical to the marketing activities of the small businesses (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

Other elements of this theme included whether the participation of the small businesses in the online communities was aimed at enhancing customer engagement, promoting the small businesses and their products or services to their target customers, having conversations with their target customers, co-creation of value with the consumers, and to receive comments and reviews from the customers (Harrigan & Miles, 2014; Guha, Harrigan, & Soutar, 2018). The

researcher also reviewed the data for information on whether the small businesses had an official strategic management practice for the management of online communities and whether these management strategies involved tracking the activities of their target customers across different social media and online platforms (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Social media support**.  Social media support as a theme entailed a review of the various ways that the social media element of the customer relationship management of small businesses supported their operations.  Some of the areas where support was anticipated included offering customer information to the sales force who were working offsite and delivering information on the available opportunities for upselling and cross-selling to the sales and marketing personnel working offsite (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

Other areas where the small businesses drew support from social media included budgeting and marketing planning, customizing the messages and approaches to communication used with the customers, and analyzing the performance of marketing campaigns (Trainor, 2012; Harrigan & Miles, 2014).  Social media also helps the small businesses in the determination of the retention rates of their customers and the customer lifetime value (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Information capture**.  The specific elements on this theme related to the practices that small businesses engaged in order to collect information about their customers and small businesses from social media.  Some of the relevant elements according to Harrigan and Miles (2014) included whether the collection of information was done continuously or intermittently.

Other elements relating to the integration of customer information were whether it was integrated from all the functions within the operations of the small businesses that deal directly with the customers, whether they integrated customer information that was gathered from

sources external to the small businesses and whether different communication channels were used in capturing the customer information (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Information use**.  This theme explored the manner in which the information that the proprietors of small businesses gathered from social media was utilized.  Some of the anticipated uses of the information as gleaned from the study by Harrigan and Miles (2014) included the assessment of the value of the individual customers, the value of any referrals made by the customers and in quantifying the sharing of information about the small businesses or their products and services between the customers.  Other anticipated uses of this information included improving the customer communication approaches and channel selection, improving the business practices, and improving the quality of the products and services that the small businesses offer to their customers (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Customer relationship orientation**.  This theme explored the practice employees, and the entire organization were oriented from the perspective of the customer relationship (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).  Some of the anticipated elements in this theme included whether the proprietors of the small businesses encouraged their employees to emphasize on building customer relations. The researcher also explored for information on whether the proprietors of the small businesses prioritized customer retention.  Another element gleaned from the study performed by Harrigan and Miles (2014) was whether the proprietors of the small businesses and the executives emphasized customer relationships as an important facet in the operations as well as one of the vital assets of the small businesses.

**Social media data**.  This theme explored the type of data to which the proprietors of small businesses had access courtesy of the use of social media.  Some of the data that businesses could collect from different social media platforms included external data such as the

performance of their competitors, customer service data, data on customer engagement, psychographic data, customer experience data, and customer satisfaction data (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Customer communication**.  Social media is one of the channels that businesses use in communicating with their customers.  This theme explored how the proprietors used social media to communicate with their targeted customers (Harrigan, Ramsey, & Ibbotson, 2012; Harrigan & Miles, 2014).  Some of these anticipated themes included the use of different social media platforms to allow the customers to engage with the small businesses, the use of social media platforms to increase the number of channels through which the customers can reach and communicate with the small businesses, and the use of social media as a channel through which they can remain in contact with their target customers (Harrigan Ramsey, & Ibbotson, 2011; Choudhury & Harrigan, 2014).

**Summary of data analysis**.  The data analyzed are the qualitative data that were collected from a total of 20 residents (Boddy, 2016), equally drawn from the proprietors of small businesses each listed in a sampling frame drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).  The audio files were transcribed to yield a written text to be incorporated in the analysis.  The coding of the data was done using QDA Miner tool.  A thematic analysis approach was used in drawing meaning from the data collected from the participants.  The anticipated themes for which the data were measured included seven themes, namely: (a) online communities, (b) social media support, (c) the capture of data, (d) the use of the data captured,

(e) the orientation of customer relationship, (f) social media data, and (g) the communication with customers.

**Reliability and Validity**

It is important that the methods, tools, and processes employed in a study are valid and the data collected and the findings drawn from the data are reliable because the outcomes of the study have implications beyond the academic endeavors of the researcher (Bridge, 2017). This section will explain the measure take in this qualitative study to enhance reliability and validity.

**Reliability**. Reliability in a study entails the replicability of the study. A study with high reliability is one that will yield similar results and findings when it is implemented by another person on a similar population (Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2008). In supporting the importance of reliability in the context of qualitative research, Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis, and Dillon (2003) argued that reliability in qualitative research is the assurance that when the qualitative study is implemented by a different researcher on a similar population, it will yield similar results.

Proving reliability in qualitative studies is challenging, especially when using the semi-structured interviews as the data collection instrument because the role of the researcher is more dynamic than in quantitative research (Bridge, 2017). Unlike in quantitative research, the role of the researcher in qualitative research involves interpretation. The perspectives of different researchers can result in different outcomes of the same interpretive process.

Various decisions were made in this qualitative study to enhance its reliability. One of the products of these decisions was the use of open-ended questions in the data collection instrument. According to Jackson and Trochim (2002), the use of open-ended questions was a reliable way of exploring the experiences of the study population with a particular research phenomenon through both terse and rich descriptions. Singer and Couper (2017) also argued

that using open-ended questions increases reliability because it allows the participants to describe their experiences and perspectives about a specific research subject without being limited by the preconceived thoughts of the researcher.

Another product of the decisions that helped enhance the reliability of this qualitative study was the use of interviews. According to Liedtka (1992), the use of interviews enables the researcher to understand the decision-making processes that the respondents employ in various business situations, the factors that they consider, as well as their thought process. The use of interviews also helped the researcher to differentiate between the cognition of the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia and their behavior (Bridge, 2017).

For the reasons above, the use of semi-structured interviews as the preferred data collection tools enhanced the reliability of this qualitative study. The use of open-ended questions in the interview schedule contributed to enhancing the reliability of this qualitative study (Bridge, 2017).

During the analysis of the transcripts, the researcher reviewed each individual interview transcripts to understand the picture of the research phenomenon that the participant painted. The analysis of the transcripts was facilitated by the use of codes. According to Creswell (2014), the application of codes using analytical software helps reduce the likelihood of errors during the analytical process.

The researcher evaluated each of the individual interview transcripts for the potential themes identified earlier. While the researcher focused on the potential themes, the researcher also actively sought to identify the reasoning of the participants to support the identified themes (Creswell et al., 2007). The researcher also sought for other relationships in the responses that helped illuminate the perspectives held by the participants (Bridge, 2017). The researcher sought

to eliminate statements that show no relevance to the subject on which this qualitative study was based. This evaluation was based on the two criteria proposed by Moustakas (1994), which demanded that the statements to be retained should explain the experience of the participant with the research phenomenon or be easily labelled and abstracted.

Other measures that were employed to enhance the reliability of this qualitative study included member checking. According to Bridge (2017), member checking is the action of giving the participants from which the qualitative data were collected the interview transcripts for them to peruse and verify that the information in the transcript is an accurate restatement of their perspectives. Creswell (2014) recommended the use of member checking to enhance the reliability and credibility of the data. The errors noted by the participants were considered by the researcher and rectified in the final version of the interview transcripts that were used for coding and subsequent data analysis.

The researcher also requested the input of the chair dissertation committee and peers in reviewing the transcripts. According to Lietz, Langer, and Furman (2016), the insights the researcher gains from these stakeholders in the study helps enhance the reliability of the qualitative study and the credibility of the findings. The review by the chair dissertation committee and peers also extended to the analysis of the data.

**Validity**. Validity is a concept in research that describes the appropriateness of the research tools, the process employed in the study and the resultant data (Capelli & Jolibert, 2009).

One of the ways through which the validity of this qualitative study was enhanced was through the use of semi-structured interview schedules. This data collection instrument was appropriate for collecting the data needed to answer the research questions because the interview

schedule offered a structure for the researcher to follow when collecting the data. This allowed the researcher to collect the data on each of the identified themes. Additionally, the semi-structured interview schedule allowed the researcher to probe the respondents when they need clarifications on their responses and when deeper insight into a certain perspective was required (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The semi-structured interview schedules also enhanced the validity of this qualitative study because they did not restrict the responses of the interviewees.

Triangulation also helped enhance the validity of this qualitative study (Bridge, 2017). Triangulation was important during the development of the concept on which this qualitative study is based. An online survey that was performed by Harrigan and Miles (2014) that explored the determinants of the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management by small businesses identified seven key factors. The seven key factors include information capture, customer communication, customer relationship orientation, social media support, online communities, information use, and social media data (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). One of the recommendations of the study was for future studies to explore these themes using qualitative methods so as to help enhance the understanding of their influence on the use of social customer relationship management in the context of small businesses (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

The questions included in the semi-structured interview schedule also enhanced the validity of this qualitative study. The questions included in the semi-structured interview schedule were designed to collect information on the seven themes that were identified by Harrigan and Miles (2014). The questions included in the semi-structured interview schedule were inspired by the findings published by Harrigan and Miles (2014). They were also tweaked

to collect the in-depth data required to answer the research question that guided this qualitative study.

The decision to use open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview schedules also enhanced the validity of this study.  Open-ended questions allowed the respondent the freedom to communicate their perspectives as opposed to close-ended questions where the responses of the participants are limited to certain perspectives (Sparrow, 2011).  The open-ended questions helped collect appropriate data to answer the research question that guided this qualitative study. The design of the questions was simple and direct so the participants were able to understand the gist of the information required of them.  The elimination of technical jargon from the questions also motivated the participants to volunteer information with more ease (Bridge, 2017).

According to Singer and Couper (2017), the use of open-ended questions helped the researchers to gain insights into the substantive responses of the participants.  Analyzing the verbatim responses of the participants also helped the researcher to determine how the participants understood the questions posed to them and how they settled on the responses that they gave to the various prompts by the researcher (Singer & Couper, 2017).

Saturation is an important factor in the validity of a qualitative study (Bridge, 2017). Saturation is a phenomenon in qualitative researcher when performing additional interviews within the same population will not yield new data (Morse, 1994).  Various decisions were made in this qualitative study that facilitated the saturation of the data collected.  One of the decisions was in the sample size.  The sample size of 20 participants was based on the recommendation made by Crouch and McKenzie (2006) on the maximum number of participants required to achieve saturation in a qualitative study.  The sample size was also recommended by Boddy (2016).  The sample size enhanced the validity of this qualitative study because it was

recommended by other studies and contributed to achieving saturation in the data that are collected.

Other decisions in this qualitative study that contributed to enhancing the validity of the study by facilitating the saturation of the data were in the sampling of the participants. The study population was stratified into four chambers of commerce within Southern West Virginia. According to Bridge (2017), stratification helped increase the richness of the interview data that the researcher collected. Stratification helped the researcher collect adequate and comprehensive data by including participants from the chambers of commerce from the three counties in Southern West Virginia. The stratification of the study population enabled the sampling of participants from each of the four countries, thereby enhancing the validity of the study by yielding data saturation.

**Summary of reliability and validity**. The use of open-ended questions enhanced reliability because they allow the researcher to gather in-depth data and probe further where clarifications are needed. The researcher used member checking to enhance the accuracy of the transcripts, and by extension, the reliability of the study. In addition, the researcher also requested the input of the chair dissertation committee and peers in reviewing the transcripts.

The triangulation of themes from other studies helped to enhance the validity of the study. The researcher also triangulated the findings to determine their consistency with existing knowledge. The validity of this qualitative study was also enhanced by the use of semi-structured interview schedules into which open-ended questions had been included. The selection of a sample that enabled the researcher to achieve data saturation enhanced the validity of the study because it allowed for the collection of comprehensive data. The same effect was achieved by the stratification of the study population so as to achieve representativeness.

**Transition and Summary of Section 2**

The second section of this study has described the methodological decisions taken in this qualitative study. The first subtitle stated the purpose that the researcher in this qualitative study is exploring. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia. This section has also highlighted the role that the researcher will play in this qualitative study. The multiple roles of the researcher in this qualitative study commenced before the actual collection of the data and end when the researcher prepared the final report of the qualitative study.

This section of this qualitative study also detailed the study population, the participants, and the sampling of the participants. The study population comprised of small business operating in Southern West Virginia. The participants comprised five proprietors of small businesses each from a sampling frame drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce (Southern West Virginia Chambers of Commerce, n.d.).

The stratification approach allowed the researcher to use the four constituent chambers of commerce as distinct cohorts to which a specified number of respondents were assigned for identification and inclusion into the list of participants from whom the researcher collected the data (Rainbolt & Dwyer, 2014). This aspect allowed a targeted representation of the participants (Hartas, 2010).

The qualitative data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule. The semi-structured interview schedule contained 20 questions that were designed to help the

researcher collect data on the seven themes identified by Harrigan and Miles (2014) as the most influential factors affecting the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management in the context of small businesses.

This section will now pave the way for the collection of data.  The first and second sections of this proposal for the qualitative study have outlined the foundation and rationale for the study and spelt out the methods through which the study will be performed respectively.  The next section will feature the presentation of the findings of this qualitative study.  The next section will also discuss the implications that the findings have on the change in business practices as well as the implications for professional practice.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

This is the third section of the dissertation. This section reviewed the data collected from the 20 small businesses in Southern West Virginia to determine how they use social media as a framework for customer relationship management. This section started with an overview of the qualitative study. The overview of the study presented a summary of the previous sections in order to create a context on which the presentation of findings can be understood. This section also included a discussion of the anticipated themes. The literature review section highlighted some of the themes that were expected from the data collected from small businesses. Highlighting the anticipated themes will help build on the context referred to in the previous sentence. This section also featured the presentation of the findings. These are the findings from the analysis of the data collected from the 20 small businesses sampled from Southern West Virginia.

The presentation of findings are ordered thematically. It also included a relationship between the various themes as well as research questions on which this dissertation is based. The presentation of findings concluded with a summary of the main findings from the study. The applications to professional practice followed the presentation of findings. This discussion highlighted the significance of the findings beyond the field of study. It entailed a discussion of how the proprietors of small businesses can use the knowledge gained from this study to not only improve their businesses, but also enhance their profitability.

Soon afterwards, a discussion of the recommendations for action and the recommendations for further study followed. The recommendations for action were directed towards the proprietors of small businesses. They entail recommended ways of using social media as a framework for customer relationship management in order to improve their

businesses and business processes. The recommendations for further study highlighted the areas that the researcher felt were not covered adequately and would benefit from further inquiry. This section of the dissertation then ends with the reflections of the researcher on the study as well as a summary of the findings and the conclusions drawn from the data collected.

**Overview of the Study**

This qualitative study was designed to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia. Social media and the advent of other supporting technologies have worked in concert to provide the small businesses numerous opportunities to enhance their communication with their target audience. Social media allows businesses to engage in two-way communication. This is communication where business owners are not just sending content to the customers but also getting their feedback. Through this communication, the proprietors of the small businesses can co-create value with their customers. Additionally, the proprietors of the small businesses can work to increase the visibility of the brands, increase customer satisfaction as well as affect their brand loyalty.

The general problem to be addressed in the qualitative study is the lack of awareness of the proprietors of small businesses on social customer relationship management practices, a finding that was made by Bridge (2017). The lack of awareness prevents them from realizing the potential that using social media platforms has in aiding engagement with their customers. They also fail to realize the potential of social media to bridge the inadequacy of resources as reported by Bridge (2017). The specific problem to be solved is the lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management can have for their enterprises.

One research question guided the qualitative study. The research question was: are the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has for their enterprises? Five other specific research questions supported the main research question. They were as follows:

1. What is the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management?

2. What is the influence of resources on the use or failure to use social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia?

3. What are the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management?

4. What effect does the use of social customer relationship management have on customer engagement and loyalty?

5. How different is the ability of the small businesses that use social customer relationship management in attracting and retaining customers different from that of small businesses that do not use social customer relationship management in Southern West Virginia?

These questions were included in order to get the researcher to explore other concepts that are closely related to the main research question.

The research questions outlined above were answered using data collected from the proprietors of small businesses sampled from Southern West Virginia. The proprietors of the small businesses from whom the data were collected were drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of

Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce. The researcher liaised with the chambers of commerce to get a list of all the eligible businesses. The eligibility was determined by applying a strict inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher randomly selected various businesses and contacted their proprietors to determine their willingness to participate in the study. The researcher contacted and recruited five small businesses from each of the four county chambers of commerce. The total number of participants for the study was 20.

The researcher administered semi-structured interviews with the 20 participants. The semi-structured interview was in the form of an interview schedule containing 20 questions. The interviews were recorded to aid in the transcription and analysis of data. It was important for the researcher to anonymize the transcripts as a prerequisite for meeting the confidential agreements with the participants as outlined in the informed consent form. Therefore, each business was given a code that while anonymizing the business, would also differentiate one transcript from another during data analysis. The businesses were coded in the order in which the interviews were performed. The first business was coded SB-01. The prefix was maintained while the suffix increased progressively to 20, the last business whose proprietor was interviewed. The analysis of the transcripts was performed using QDA Miner. During the analysis, the transcripts were coded for the seven themes that were identified during the literature review.

The main research question guiding the qualitative study was whether the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has for their enterprises. Four other research questions were included in order to help explore other concepts that are closely related to the main research question. The data collection instrument contained 20 questions. Different questions were

included to answer specific research questions. Of the 20 questions, 11 of them were designed to answer the first research question. The first research question explored the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. One question was included in the data collection instrument in order to answer the second research question. The second research question explored the influence of resources on the use or failure to use social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia.

Three questions in the data collection tool were added specifically to answer the third research question on the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. The data collection instrument contained two additional questions that were included specifically to answer the fourth research question on the effect the use of social customer relationship management has on customer engagement and loyalty. The data collection instrument also contained two additional questions included specifically to answer the fifth research question on the difference in the ability of the small businesses that use social customer relationship management in attracting and retaining customers and that of small businesses that do not use social customer relationship management in Southern West Virginia.

The first research question explored the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. The questions in the data collection instrument that were included to answer this research question were questions 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, and 16. The responses of the participants showed there is an awareness of social media and the potential that it has as a framework for customer relationship management. When asked what social media meant in the

context of their businesses, the owners of the 20 businesses sampled for the study reported that social media helped them to communicate with their customers.  In addition, two other businesses (10% of total sample) also highlighted that social media helps their businesses to remain visible to the target audience.

The third question in the data collection instrument was also essential in answering the first research question.  The third question on the data collection instrument asked about the platforms on which the proprietors engaged with their customers.  The knowledge of the social media platforms available for use by businesses is an indication of an awareness of the potential of social media as a framework for customer relationship management.  The owners of the small businesses who are not aware of the commonly used social media platforms are unlikely to use them for business communication.  The responses from the participants showed that most of the businesses used more than one social media platform.  More precisely, all the proprietors of the small businesses (100% of the total sample) reported using Facebook as their main social media platform.  Another 16 proprietors (80% of the total sample) reported that they also used Instagram in addition to Facebook.  The number of proprietors who reported using Twitter was 11 (55% of the total sample).  Proprietors of two businesses (10% of total sample) mentioned using Snapchat as a social media platform while another one proprietor (5% of total sample) mentioned using a Snapchat and Pinterest as two other social media platforms in addition to Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

The researcher was also interested in understanding the factors that influenced the decision by the proprietors of the small businesses to choose the social media platforms that they used for engaging with customers.  It was, for this reason, that the fourth question was included in the data collection instrument.  This question was important in determining the awareness of

the proprietors. It is not just enough that the proprietors know of the existence of several social media platforms and that they can be used for business communication. This question would help the researcher to determine why the proprietors chose to use one social media platform over another or why they chose to use several social media platforms. The analysis of the data showed that the proprietors of small businesses have an in-depth understanding of why certain social media platforms are appropriate while others may not be. Many of the proprietors chose Facebook because of its popularity.

The popularity of Facebook was reported by 15 (75% of the total sample) of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed as the reason for the decision to use social media platforms. The other phrases used were statements such as "it is the industry standard" or "it is the biggest social media platform" to describe why they chose to use Facebook. Such statements are indicative that Facebook is very popular and many of the populations targeted by the small businesses use the social media platform. The proprietors using Instagram and Twitter attributed their use to the two social media platforms that were popular with the younger generation. Four out of the 20 proprietors (20% of total sample) who were interviewed reported they used Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat because they targeted the younger generation and that this population commonly used these social media platforms. The proprietors were able to give these reasons because they were aware of the strengths and weaknesses of different social media platforms and how these attributes benefited their businesses. These findings showed a high level of awareness among the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia about the potential of social media for the enterprises.

In addition to knowing the existence of the social media platforms, the researcher was also interested in understanding whether the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West

Virginia were aware of how to use social media platforms to enhance business communication. In this regard, the questions 6 and 7 in the data collection instrument were included in order to explore the awareness of the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia on the use of formalized marketing plans to support the use of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The analysis of the findings showed a relatively low level of awareness about the use of formalized marketing plans to support social customer relationship management.

When asked about the nature of the formalized marketing plans that they used for the small businesses, most of the proprietors reported that they did not use formalized marketing plans. Eighteen of the 20 (90% of the total sample) proprietors who were interviewed reported that they did not have any formalized marketing plans. They reported that they based their decisions on intuitiveness. The proprietors developed a feel of what would work and what would not work from the many years that they had been running the businesses. One of the proprietors (5% of the total sample) who was interviewed said that they operated using a loose formalized marketing plan. One out of the 18 proprietors (5% of the total sample) who reported not using a formalized marketing plan reiterated they were looking to develop a formalized marketing plan to be launched and implemented in 2019.

Only one of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed (5% of the total sample) categorically reported they had a formalized marketing plan that guided the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management. Another proprietor out of the 18 proprietors (5% of total sample) who reported not using formalized marketing plan also alluded to the presence of a structured marketing planning. The structure involved quarterly meetings in which they discussed the marketing strategies that they would implement for the next quarter.

They would also allocate a budget to facilitate social customer relationship management during this meeting. These findings indicated that most of the proprietors of the small businesses were not aware of formalized marketing plans. Some of the proprietors who did not use the formalized marketing plans were aware if their importance. Regardless, most of them relied on their experience and intuition when making decisions related to marketing strategies and their implementation.

The seventh question in the data collection instrument explored the role that social media played in the achievement of marketing objectives through the formalized marketing plans adopted by the proprietors of the small businesses. In addition to having formalized marketing plans, the researcher was also interested in knowing whether the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of how to use them to facilitate the achievement of the marketing objectives. Because many of the proprietors (90% of the total sample) did not have formalized marketing plans posed a challenge when answering this question. However, the proprietors of small businesses still reported that social media platforms were influential in meeting the marketing objectives of their small businesses. They showed an awareness of the fact that social media platforms can be used to facilitate businesses in meeting the marketing objectives.

One of the emerging roles that social media played was the role of a platform for advertising. Twelve of the 20 proprietors who are interviewed (60% of the total sample) reported they used social media for advertising their products to the target audience. The role involved posting their products on the social media platforms for the customers to see. The role also involved communicating promotions to the customers. The proprietors reported that they used social media platforms to increase the visibility of their products to increase the foot traffic to their small businesses. Eleven of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed (55% of total

sample) also reported that social media served the role of enhancing communication with their target audience.  The communication to which the proprietors alluded was the two-way communication where the customers also used the social media platforms to engage with the owners of small businesses.  These findings indicated that even though many of the proprietors of the small businesses did not use formalized marketing plans, they were aware that social media could be used to facilitate the achievement of marketing objectives of small businesses. The findings showed the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of how to use social media platforms to enhance their marketing activities.

The researcher explored the engagement by the proprietors of the small businesses with the customers over social media platforms as a way of determining their awareness of the potential for social media as a framework for social customer relationship management. Questions 8, 9, and 10 in the data collection instruments explored different aspects of engagement taking place on social media platforms.  When asked about the nature of their engagement with the consumers through the various social media platforms, the 20 proprietors (100% of the total sample) who were interviewed reported they used social media platforms for direct engagement with their customers.  The analysis of the findings showed the proprietors of small businesses are aware of the many ways through which they could engage the customers directly.

One of these ways was through posts communicating various aspects of the businesses. The customers react to the post uploaded by the proprietors of the small businesses through the comments.  Alternatively, the proprietors could upload photos or other images that communicated a specific aspect of their businesses.  This was an invitation for the customers to react through comments.  Considering there are many social media platforms available to the

proprietors of small businesses, the researcher wanted to determine whether the owners of the

businesses were aware of the social media platform on which the most engagement occurred.

The analysis of the findings showed that all the proprietors of the small businesses who were

interviewed (100% of the total sample) reported that most of the engagement occurred on

Facebook. The proprietors attributed this trend to the popularity of Facebook. Because

Facebook was the most popular social media platform implies that most of their customers were

using the platform. Additionally, the proprietors also attributed the trend that Facebook allows

them to engage using the content of different formats including text, images, and videos.

The proprietors of the small businesses who were interviewed showed an awareness that

some content is more appropriate on specific social media platforms. The emerging perspectives

from the participants were that Instagram was more suited for engagement that involved

graphics, images, and photos. On the other hand, Twitter had textual limitations. Therefore,

only short messages could be posted on Twitter. A significant number of proprietors who were

interviewed reported that Twitter was not able to meet their needs for customer engagement and

advertisement. The proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed felt that Facebook was

able to combine text, images, and videos. This attribute made Facebook the preferred social

media platform for many of the businesses because it allowed them many opportunities to

communicate with the customers exhaustively.

The proprietors of small businesses might show preference to one social media platform

over another. The researcher was interested in determining the factors that influenced the

preferences shown by the proprietors of the small businesses with regard to the platforms used in

customer engagement. The researcher wanted to understand whether the decision to use one

social media platform over another was influenced by the familiarity of the proprietor with the

application of the social media platform for the purposes of business communication or by the preferences of the customers. Five of the 20 proprietors who are interviewed (25% of total sample) said that the decision to use one social media platform over another was influenced by their familiarity with the application of the platform for the purposes of social customer relationship management. Another five of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed (25% of total sample) said their decision to use one social media platform over another was influenced by a confluence of both their familiarity with the application of the platform for the purposes of social customer relationship management and the preferences of the customers. The analysis of the data showed that 10 of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed (50% of the total sample) reported the decision to use one social media platform over another was influenced by the preferences of the customers by the possibility that more of their target customers used one social media platform more than another. These findings indicate that the proprietors of the small businesses did not use social media platforms arbitrarily. The findings show that the proprietors of the small businesses have an awareness of the trends of the target audience regarding the use of social media platforms and their competencies about using social media as a framework for social customer relationship management. This awareness is evidenced in the way that the proprietors make decisions on what social media platform to use.

The two other questions that were included in the data collection instrument to help answer the first research question were the questions 15 and 16. The two sets of questions explored the competencies of the proprietors of the small businesses to utilize social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The analysis of the data showed that many of the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of how to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management. However, the competencies of the employees were

relatively low, as many of them were not allowed to manage the social media platforms on behalf of the business. Some of the proprietors of the small businesses reported that they appointed one person to manage social media platforms. Concerning improving the capabilities to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management, two of the proprietors who were interviewed (10% of total sample) reported they participated in workshops and seminars that taught them how to use social media more effectively for business communication. They also reported they used Facebook tutorials and videos so they could learn how to use the social media platform effectively to enhance customer relationship management.

Most of the questions in the data collection instruments were included to answer the first research question. The first research question was concerned with the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. The analysis of the findings shows that the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The analysis of the findings also showed that the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of the available social media platforms. They were also aware of the trends regarding the use of social media platforms by the target audience, the attributes of different social media platforms and the suitability of these attributes for business communication, and the social media platforms on which most of the target audience could be found. The analysis of the data also showed the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of how to use social media platforms for customer engagement. Overall, the findings showed the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia have a high level of awareness on the use of social media for the purposes of customer relationship management.

The second research question explored the influence of resources on the use or failure to use social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia. The analysis of the data showed that the two resources that were influential in the decision by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management were time and money. In explaining the significance of money as an influential factor in the decision to use social media platforms, some of the proprietors of the small businesses compared the cost of customer engagement using mainstream or traditional communication channels with the cost incurred in using social media platforms. They found that it was comparatively cheaper when using social media platforms for the purposes of customer engagement. Nine out of the 20 proprietors who were interviewed (45% of total sample) argued that financial resources had an influence on the decision to use social media as a platform for customer relationship management. Many of them felt that mainstream customer relationship management and advertising was too expensive for their limited resources. Social media platforms offer them a cheaper but effective alternative to the much more expensive mainstream methods of advertisement and customer relationship management. Other proprietors of small businesses felt that social customer relationship management offered them a better return on investment in advertising.

In addition to financial resources, time was another resource that was identified as being influential in the decision by the proprietors of small businesses to use social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management. Eight of the 20 (40% of the total sample) proprietors who are interviewed reported that time was an influential factor in the decision to use social media for customer engagement. One of the emerging perspectives was that unlike traditional methods of advertising, social media platforms were not laborious. Therefore, they do

not require the owners of businesses to invest a lot of time to achieve effective communication with the customers. This perspective was particularly popular among the proprietors of the small businesses who said that time was a constraining resource for them. They elected to use social media platforms because the simplicity of the platforms allowed them to maximize the limited time that they had. Other proprietors of small businesses reported that social media allowed them to achieve so much more within a limited period compared to the avenues they were using previously to maintain customer engagement.

The analysis of the findings showed that resources have a significant influence on the decision by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The findings showed that the proprietors of the small businesses were aware of their resource limitations. They were aware that their limited resources could not allow them to invest in the software that is required for performing mainstream customer relationship management. It is for this reason that they relied on the more cost-effective alternative presented by social media platforms. Resources in the form of finances and time had a significant influence on the choice by the proprietors of small businesses to use social media platforms. The second research question explored the influence of resources on the use or failure to use social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia. The proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia were sampled for this study reported using social media platforms to enhance customer engagement. The analysis of the responses showed that resources, both time and finances, played an influential role in their decision to use social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management. Social customer relationship management suited limited financial

power and time in order to allow them to perform customer relationship management, a function that is indispensable for the continued viability and profitability of their small businesses.

The third research question explored the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. Questions 18, 19, and 20 were included in the data collection instrument in order to collect the data necessary to answer the third research question. Question 18 explored the perceptions of the proprietors of the small businesses on the suitability of social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management. All the 20 proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed (100% of total sample) agreed that social media platforms are suitable for the purposes of customer relationship management. The proprietors of the small businesses attributed the perception about the suitability of social media platforms that the social media platforms allowed them to reach customers that they would otherwise not have been able to reach with their limited resources. Other proprietors thought that social media platforms are suitable because they are in keeping with the trends in contemporary society where most of the communication was occurring online on digital platforms. Even though there was agreement across the board about the suitability of social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management, some of the proprietors identified some hiccups. The proprietors operating in the medical field highlighted the privacy laws as an impediment to the effective use of social media for customer relationship management.

Question 19 on the data collection instrument explored the possibility that some of the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia might have been discouraged by negative experiences while using social media platforms. The review of the responses from the respondents showed there were negative experiences related to using social media for the

purposes of customer relationship management.  The most prevalent negative experience that was reported was the negative publicity that the small businesses got from the comments posted on different social media platforms by customers who were unhappy with certain aspects of the services or products offered.  Seventeen of the 20 proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed (85% of total sample) reported they had experienced negative publicity because of either a comment from the customers or bad reviews on the products or services.  They argued that the social media platforms amplified the negative comments and made them more visible to other potential customers who might use bad reviews to make decisions on whether or not to engage with a business.

Despite the challenges, the analysis of the responses in question 20 of the data collection instruments showed that the majority of them are of the opinion that social media was still important for the continued growth and development of that small businesses.  Question 20 in the data collection instrument explored the perceptions are the proprietors of the small businesses on how they can employ social media platforms effectively for the purposes of customer relationship management.  Some of the common responses were keeping the review sections of the social media platforms visible for the customers and requesting the customers to provide reviews of their experience with the business.  The argument by the proprietors was that even if the reviews section contained some negative comments and ratings from the customers, it allowed the proprietors of the small businesses to show they were able to address the issues raised by their customers.  Another common recommendation for the effective use of social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management was to personalize the communication or engagement with the customers.  Many of the proprietors discouraged against

generic communication with the customers. A personalized experience is likely to make a customer feel valued by the business.

The fourth research question explored the effect of the use of social customer relationship management on customer engagement and loyalty. Questions 12 and 17 were included in the data collection instrument in order to gather information that would be used to answer this research question. Questions 12 and 17 explored the impact of the use of social media platforms in the increase or decrease of the lord of the customers of the products or services offered by small businesses. The analysis of the responses from the proprietors of the small businesses in this question showed that the use of social media platforms resulted in increasing customer loyalty. Ten of the 20 proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed (50% of total sample) were categorical in stating that they had noticed a definite increase in customer loyalty for their products or services after they started using social media platforms. The most common illustration of increasing customer loyalty was that familiar customers kept engaging with the business using social media platforms. Other proprietors also noted that there was an increase in the number of return customers after they started using social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management. It is also noteworthy that three of the twenty proprietors who were interviewed (15% of total sample) categorically reported there was no increase in customer loyalty since they started using social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management. Another seven out of the 20 proprietors were interviewed (35% of the total sample) reported they were not sure whether there was an increase in customer loyalty.

The analysis for the findings showed that most of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia were of the opinion that the use of social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management resulted in increasing customer loyalty for both

products and services. A significant number was noncommittal on whether or not there was an increase in customer loyalty due to the use of social media platforms. Regardless, it is encouraging that only three of the 20 proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed were categorical that there was no increase in customer loyalty because of the use of social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management.

The fifth and final research question explored the differences in the how the ability of the small businesses that use social customer relationship management in attracting and retaining customers differed from that of small businesses that do not use social customer relationship management in Southern West Virginia. Questions 13 and 14 are included in the data collection instrument in order to gather information to answer this research question. The two questions collected information on the kind of data that the proprietors of the small businesses were able to gather about their customers using social media and how they used this information to improve the customer targeting practices.

The analysis of the responses in the two questions showed that proprietors on the small businesses used social media platforms to correct a variety of data from the customers. Some of the information collected included the likes and dislikes of the customers, the products that are popular to the customers, and the perceptions of the customers on various aspects of the businesses. The proprietors of the small businesses also collected information on the customers who engaged to the business using the social media platforms and recommendations from the customers about the changes they would like to see in different aspects of the business. The proprietors of the small businesses reported they used the information gathered from the customers through the social media platforms in three major ways.

The proprietors used captured information for organizational learning. The proprietors of the small businesses reported they used the feedback gained from the customers to learn better ways of positioning their business so it is more visible to the customers as well as to learn how to improve their targeting practices. The second way that the information gathered through the social media platforms was used was for process improvement. The feedback gathered from the customers was influential for process improvement because it identified the areas in the various business processes where the customers noted inefficiencies. More importantly, the proprietors of the small business reported that they used the information gathered to the social media platforms to improve the customer targeting processes by identifying the social media platforms on which most of the target audience could be found and the development strategies to increase the reach and visibility to those customers.

The third use of the information collected from the social media platforms as reported by the proprietors of the small businesses was product improvement. Some of the feedback gathered from the customers included recommendations on how to improve their products to suit the needs of the customers. The proprietors working in the entertainment industry found that their customers gave feedback on the type of entertainment that they would prefer. The proprietors of the businesses would use this information in order to tailor their products and services meet the needs of their customers.

**Anticipated Themes/Perceptions**

The seven themes included online communities, social media support, the capture of information, the use of the information captured, and the orientation of customer relationship, social media data and the communication with customers (Bridge, 2017). The other concepts explored during the analysis included the use of formalized marketing plans, the engagement

with the customers, and the measurable impact attributed to the use of social media. The

analysis also explored the reliance on assistance from external companies, the influence of the

preferences of customers, resources, and the familiarity of the proprietors with various social

media platforms on the choice to use social media as a framework for customer relationship

management. The other concept explored during the analysis was how the proprietors of the

small businesses defined social customer relationship management.

**Presentation of the Findings**

The qualitative study was performed on 20 small businesses operated within three

counties of Southern West Virginia. The selection of the small businesses adhered to several

inclusion and exclusion criteria, one of which was that were employed staff for an eligible

business could not exceed 100 people excluding the owner and other unsalaried members of the

owner's family. This criterion was based on the definition of small businesses employed by the

Small Business Administration (2016) and reported in Bridge (2017). The 20 businesses were

sampled from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of

Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of

Commerce.

The requirement for the participating businesses to be members of their local county

chambers of commerce was because of a finding by Lacho and Brockmann (2011). The finding

was that the small businesses which subscribed to local chambers of commerce benefited by

promoting their businesses to fellow members. In addition to the increased opportunities for

networking, the small businesses also have access to a pool of resources that can help in the

promotion of small businesses.

The small businesses operated in different industries. SB-01, for instance, operated in the travel and tourism industry. SB-02 operated in both the restaurant and entertainment industries. SB-03 and SB-04 operated in the pharmaceutical and hospitality industries respectively. The hospitality and tourism industry was also represented by SB-06. SB-05 operated in the personal care products industry; SB-07 in the outdoor industry; SB-08 in the collectables industry; and SB-09 in the restaurant industry alongside businesses SB-13 and SB-16. SB-18 operated in the performing arts industry; SB-11 in the sports industry; SB-15 in the craft brewery industry; SB-14 in the recreational industry; SB-19 in the cosmetics industry; SB-17 in the food service or catering industry; and SB-12 in the medical industry.

The following paragraphs present the findings from the data gathered and analyzed from the small businesses recruited to participate in this study. The presentation of the findings were based on the seven themes identified in the literature review as well as other concepts that were included in the research questions. A discussion of the relationship between the findings and the individual research questions that guided this qualitative study follows.

**Online communities**. Online communities can be developed either by the customers or by the business owners. According to Harrigan and Miles (2014), many of the proprietors of small businesses choose not to participate in the online communities that are created by the customers. Instead, the proprietors of the small businesses elect to create their own online communities. The proprietors then invite the customers to join their business-operated online communities. After joining the online communities, they can participate in the conversations surrounding the business, its products, services, as well as the brand.

The analysis of data showed that all the online communities used by the businesses were created and operated by the business proprietors of the small businesses. These online

communities are in the form of accounts and pages on the various social media platforms. Facebook, for instance, allows businesses to create a business page. The owners of the business invite their customers to like the business page and follow them on Facebook. Knowing this, almost all the businesses sampled reported using Facebook as one of the social media platforms on which they engaged with the customers. More importantly, they highlighted the importance of their Facebook business page as a way of engaging with their target audience. The business page represents an online community comprised of all the customers who like and follow the business. They can engage with both the proprietors of business and other customers who like the business or its products.

The proprietors can also communicate with the customers by posting general content or addressing the specific comments made by individual customers. The proprietors of the small businesses can also monitor the engagement of the customers in order to gain insights on the areas of the business that are performing well and those that would benefit from process improvement. Monitoring the engagement of customers also helps small businesses with product or service development (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Social media support**. Social customer relationship management is much more than just facilitating engagement between the customers and the proprietors of the small businesses. Social customer relationship management also facilitates the business to make more sales through a variety of ways. According to Harrigan and Miles (2014), the owners of small businesses can use the data on their customers that can be readily gathered from social media platforms to facilitate the development of strategic decisions that help them generate more revenue.

One of the caveats identified by Chen, Chiang, and Storey (2012) about the data collected from social media platforms is that unlike the data from mainstream customer relationship management software, it is challenging to analyze. Harrigan and Miles (2014) argued that small businesses could use the data collected from social media platforms to support decision-making during normal operations. Some of them include decisions relating to marketing campaigns, sales planning, and advertisements targeting existing customers and new target markets. Depending on the expertise of the proprietors of small businesses, they can also use the data gathered from various social media platforms to calculate the retention rate and customer lifetime value.

The analysis of the data collected during the study showed a congruence with the arguments above. It was evident that the proprietors of the small businesses used the data or information gained from social media platforms to make strategic decisions about their products, services and marketing strategies among other business decisions. SB-17, for instance, said the following when asked about the use of the information gathered from social media,

> Basically I use it, I utilize it to get a feel of what I should do that week, you know, what I should run, what specials I should run, what have I not done lately, and that is worthy, you know.

This is evidence to show that businesses use social media to provide support for the strategic decisions that need to be made about various business processes. In this excerpt, the proprietor of SB-17, a business that operates in the food service or catering industry, uses social media data to make decisions on food items to make and the promotions to include as part of the bigger marketing strategy of the business.

**Capture of information**.  It is relatively easy for a business with a good product to generate engagement from its customers via social media platforms.  However, Chen et al. (2012) identified the problem in capturing information from all the engagement on social media. It is of interest to understand how the proprietors of small businesses capture information from the engagement with their customers on social media platforms.  In some instances, the customers are direct in the engagement, and they identify the problem areas for the businesses. The proprietor of SB-16 said, "Yes, absolutely, and you know someone messages you like this, wasn't good tonight, we will make it better for them."  The aspect of interest in this excerpt is that the customer is very direct about what did not please them.  Therefore, the proprietor of the small business can take measures to address what the customer pointed out.

In other instances, the proprietors of the small businesses have to make inferences from the type of data that they gather from the social media platforms.  The proprietor in SB-07 said,

> For us, it boils down to, if I post this thing on Instagram and someone comes on the door and says, hey I saw your post, it is a win, it is such a win, and we get so excited, and that happens regularly but, not like constantly.  But, you know, that is how we judge.

In this instance, the proprietor has to infer that their communication on social media was influential in increasing foot traffic in their business.

Lee, Ahn, and Bang (2011) highlighted the importance of touch points during information capture.  According to Sandberg (2014), social media has various touch points through which the proprietor of the business encounters a customer.  The success of a proprietor in using social media as a framework for customer relationship management is partly defined by their awareness of the fact that the touch points offer avenues through which they can collect information about the customers.  One of the touch points highlighted by many of the proprietors

from whom the data were collected was the comments of their customers to the content posted

on the official business pages.  The proprietor of SB-13 said, "...it's cool cuz we can post

pictures of what we have going on, people comment on it and say what they like, and they can

leave us reviews, I see their reviews, good and bad."  The touch point in this instance is the

comments from the customers in reaction to the content from the proprietor.  The proprietor can

make inferences from the comments of the customers.  The proprietor in SB-09 demonstrates

how they capture information from inferences made from data collected from other touch points.

The proprietor said,

> And you know our typical Friday or Saturday night videos get 1000 or 2000 views, and
>
> between shares and people because, and that one gets our word out more, we were up to
>
> like 80,000 views and over 1000 shares of that video.  I mean it went crazy.

The proprietors are able to infer from the sheer numbers that their performance for the evening

was better than other evenings.  Considering the fact that SB-09 operates in the restaurant

industry, and with a small entertainment component, the proprietor can infer that posting a video

of the entertainment offerings on social media helps propagate word of mouth and get more

engagement from the customers.

**Use of the information captured**.  Harrigan and Miles (2014) argued that the data

collected from the social media platforms were used to support the various decisions of small

businesses.  Harrigan and Miles (2014) argued that most of the proprietors of small businesses

are preoccupied with daily business decisions regarding operational and marketing functions.

Consequently, they are unable to use social media data to calculate complex indicators that can

help them focus on the long-term viability and success of the business.  Such indicators include

the customer referral value, the lifetime value of a customer, and the rate at which the customers

shared information (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). It is important to determine how this theoretical argument compares to the practical experiences of the small business owners.

The analysis of the data collected showed this to be the case. When asked how they used the information they collected from the customers over the various social media platforms, the responses of the proprietors of the small businesses varied significantly. The proprietor of SB-02, for instance, said,

> I don't know if I actively do that, I think that may be passive, I absorb all this information, and I may not be thinking those exact things when making those posts, but all that stuff that I see and gather comes out.

The proprietor alluded to passive use of information gathered from social media platforms. The proprietor in SB-15 said,

> When you take a photo of that and put it on social media, you know, you can see the response from people and totally understand whether the people are into that kind of thing or they're not into that and if you're not into that kind of thing you know you're not going to go there again, if they are into it, I'm going to make sure I tell people every time I feel, so it's a big deal.

Most of the proprietors of the small businesses used the information they gathered on social media for the purpose of decisions on marketing and product development. Apart from the proprietor of SB-09 who highlighted the numbers of customers sharing their content on social media platforms, not all the other proprietors who were interviewed used the data to analyze any of the complex indicators highlighted by Harrigan and Miles (2014). It is evident that most of the proprietors used the information captured from social media for their decisions relating to the day-to-day business processes with little regard for long-term focus.

**The orientation of customer relationship**.  The concept of customer relationship orientation relates to the ability of the proprietors of small businesses to create a culture that enables the creation of relationships that are mutually beneficial in the short-term and in the long-term (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).  Studies by Harrigan et al. (2011) and Merrilees, Rundle-Thiele, and Lye (2011) have shown that the proprietors of small businesses seek to create lasting relationships with their customers through social media.  They see their customers as valuable stakeholders to the success of their small businesses.  The proprietors of the small businesses sampled for this study showed tendencies to maintain a relationship with their customers long after the first touch point.  The proprietor of SB-01, for instance, said,

> I think it's got a big effect on that, and I can point to dozens of people, especially on Facebook, and to a lesser extent on Instagram, who interact with us regularly, and they are loyal customers, and they come here most of the times in a year, and they like to interact with us on Facebook and on Instagram, and we try…, when I talk with those people in comment threads, I address them as friends, "Hey..(whatever your first name is)..." coz I know a little bit about them, a might drop a line like..."  How are your kids, did you have a great time…" and in those cases, I actually also, which I normally don't do, I also sign my name on the comments, if it's a more personal comment, I will put 'J' at the end of it so that you know who you are talking to.

This excerpt shows the intention and effort by the proprietors of the small businesses to create long-lasting and mutually beneficial relationships with their customers.

**Social media data**.  The concept of social media data relates to the kind of information that the proprietors of small businesses are able to gather about the business and customers from social media platforms.  The study by Harrigan and Miles (2014) showed the proprietors of small

businesses are able to collect a variety of data including the level of interaction with the

customers, the quality of product and services offered, and psychographic data. According to

Chen et al. (2012), the proprietors of the small businesses are also able to collect other data such

as customer satisfaction, the preferences of the customers, competitor information, and the trends

in the market.

  The analysis of the data collected shows that these are some of the types of data that the

proprietors of the small businesses collected from the various social media platforms. One of the

predominant uses of social media was to gauge the perceptions of the customers on the products

and services on offer. The proprietors of the small businesses used social media to understand

the preferences of their customers. Using this information, they would make decisions related to

product and service development or improvement. This argument was illustrated by SB-10 who

said,

> I am just picking up their interests, if we put up some records as opposed to CDs, maybe
>
> we will get more likes on records on Facebook as opposed to the CDs as people are
>
> interested in those as they used to be. Especially if you are on social media, people tend
>
> to get more excited over one product over another.

It is evident that the proprietor in this business inferred the preferences of one product over

another by the customer based on the number of customer likes on a certain product post.

Ideally, the proprietor would stock more of the preferred product. The proprietor will also

increase the marketing of such a product in order to reach more customers.

  The analysis of the data also showed the proprietors of small businesses use social media

to gather information on customer satisfaction. SB-05 said, "We use mostly Facebook, it gives

us an avenue for our customers to give feedback on our products..." The proprietor of SB-06 said,

> I get a lot of reviews of Facebook, and people review me all over the place, and I review each one and answer each one, and I respond to everybody.  I look at what they are saying, what they didn't like, what might have been a weaker thing.

Considering that most of the comments are organic nature, the proprietors of the small businesses have to make inferences from the information given.  If a customer says that he/she did not like something about the business, product, or service, then the proprietor of the small business can infer that the customer was not satisfied with the particular aspect.

The analysis of the data also showed the proprietors of the small businesses used social media data to stay updated on the trends in the respective industries.  The proprietor in SB-02 said,

> You see if you go through my Facebook page, it's all restaurants and breweries and music venues and bands, I want to see what they are doing, what works for them, what doesn't work, it's a great way to see that, it's a great way to know about new restaurants what's coming in the area, who's coming in the area, and restaurant trends, I also follow restaurant industry news, restaurant blogs, advice, things like that, you know, restaurant.com, I follow those things to know what's going on.

This excerpt also shows the proprietor in this business uses social media data in order to stay informed about what other competitors in the industry are doing.  The proprietor can use this information to make improvements in the business to remain competitive.

**Communication with customers**.  This theme relates to how the proprietors of small businesses characterize communication practices with customers over social media.  According

to Harrigan and Miles (2014), some of the proprietors of small businesses characterized communication with their customers as regular, multichannel, or interactive. Others might characterize their communication as either formal or informal. Those who characterized communication as multi-channel are the proprietors who use different channels of communication to remain in contact with their customers. Some of the different channels could include a variety of social media platforms.

The analysis of the data collected reflected this theme as it is reported in the literature. The proprietor of SB-14 characterized their communication with their customers as being regular. The proprietor said, "Well, in today's world, it means a lot because we try to be friends with anyone on Facebook and other social media and that way we can keep in contact daily with our customers." It is evident from the excerpt that in addition to the communication being regular; it is also multi-channeled due to the use of other social media platforms. The interaction between the proprietors of the small businesses and the customers might also be formal or informal depending on the relationship they have developed. When contributing on this matter, the proprietor in SB-01 said,

> I can point to dozens of people, especially on Facebook, and to a lesser extent on
> Instagram, who interact with us regularly, and they are loyal customers, and they come
> here most of the times in a year, and they like to interact with us on Facebook and on
> Instagram, and we try…, when I talk with those people in comment threads, I address
> them as friends, "Hey..(whatever your first name is)..." coz I know a little bit about them,
> a might drop a line like..." How are your kids, did you have a great time…" and in those
> cases, I actually also, which I normally don't do, I also sign my name on the comments, if

it's a more personal comment, I will put 'J' at the end of it so that you know who you are

talking to.

The proprietor of this business indicated having a good personal relationship with specific loyal

customers.  The proprietor uses an informal and personal tone when communicating with such

customers.  It is evident that the proprietor knows sufficient to personal information about them

to ask about their personal lives.

The analysis of the data also showed that most of the communication for the small

businesses was multi-channeled.  Almost all the businesses sampled reported using more than

one social media platform to maintain communication with their customers.  In response to the

type of social media platforms used, the proprietor of SB-11 said, "As a platform, we do

Facebook and Instagram."  The proprietor of SB-07 said, "We strictly do Facebook and

Instagram."  This excerpt shows that the proprietors of small businesses use multi-channel

communication.  The use of multi-channel communication is beneficial because it allows small

businesses to reach the target audiences using different social media platforms.  Additionally, it

allows the proprietors of small businesses to exploit the advantages that different social media

platforms offer for the benefit of increasing their reach (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

**Other concepts**.  In addition to the seven themes gleaned from the Harrigan and Miles

(2014), there are other several concepts that were explored in the study.  One of the questions

asked to the participants was the relevance that social customer relationship management had in

the context of small businesses.  Many of the proprietors of small businesses argued that social

customer relationship management is a way to help them communicate with their target

audience.  The proprietor in SB-16 said,

It's actually very crucial for our business. It's how we show our specials menu changes all that, mainly specials, we can post we are having two-dollar beers this day, half price perhaps this day, we have a mystery beer on Wednesdays. It just helps us get our specials out there and all that.

The proprietor in this business is able to communicate any changes in the offering to the customers. The proprietor of the business is also able to communicate any promotions that might interest his customers.

Other proprietors stated that social customer relationship management was a way to sustain the relationships that they had created with the customers to enhance repeat business. When asked what social customer relationship management means in the context of the business, the proprietor in SB-10 said,

It costs a whole lot to bring somebody in the door, once they are in the door, you wanna keep that relationship with the customers, you treat them right, you want them to leave with a good feeling so that they will come back.

Evidently, social customer relationship management helped the proprietor to maintain the relationship with the customers to cultivate and sustain loyalty.

Other proprietors reported that social customer relationship management offers an avenue for the customers to submit feedback about the experience with a business and its products. In the same breath, the proprietors also used social media to examine the information that is important to the customers. The proprietor in SB-05 for instance, said, "...it gives us an avenue for our customers to give feedback on our products, and then also for us to let them know where we gonna be for them to find us." This excerpt illustrates the two-way communication between the owners of small businesses and customers.

Businesses can choose from many social media platforms.  Different social media platforms have unique aspects that differentiate them from others.  When prompted about the social media platforms that they use, the recurring platforms included Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.  The other online avenues that were mentioned include business websites, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Expedia platforms.  Most of the businesses reported that they preferred using Facebook as the main social media platform.

Instagram and Snapchat were used by those businesses that targeted the younger generation.  The proprietor in SB-16 said, "Snapchat and Instagram are kinda to target more of the college kids, the younger."  The proprietor in SB-12 said, "Twitter is kinda the millennials, the younger crowd, Instagram is, we finding more and more middle-aged folks on Instagram now, but that was the early twenties type of platform."  The proprietors using Facebook predominantly attributed the decision to a variety of factors.  The proprietor in SB-09 said, "Our age group is older, so I mean they do more of the Facebook than Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat and some of the other ones, I mean so it kinda fits more for customers."  The indication here is that Facebook is synonymous with the older generation.  Therefore, a business whose target audience is composed of the older populations is more likely to use Facebook as a social media platform compared to Instagram, Twitter, and Snapchat.  The proprietor in SB-02 said, "You know, industry standard, influenced me.  Obviously, Facebook is the largest; you can reach the most people."  The proprietor in this business attributes the decision to use Facebook as the main social media platform to the fact that it is the largest social media platform.  Therefore, Facebook offers them an opportunity for the widest reach compared to the other platforms.

In addition to factors inherent in the design of the various social media platforms, the researcher hypothesized that resources might have an influence on the decision by the proprietors

of the small businesses to select social media as a framework for customer relationship management. This hypothesis is supported by the resource-based view of the firm, one of the two theories that form the conceptual framework for the study. The theory posits that the resources and competencies to which it has access (Barney, 1991) influence whether or not a firm achieves its goals. Resources and competencies are significant in the sense that in the absence of competences, the availability of resources alone is not enough to generate the desired effect through social customer relationship management (Garrido-Moreno et al., 2014). This means that there needs to be a perfect balance between the availability of resources and the competencies in the small business for social customer relationship management to generate to the desired effect for the proprietors.

The analysis of data showed that resources were a significant factor in the decision of the proprietors to use social customer relationship management. The two types of resources that were highlighted as significant by the proprietors of small businesses that were sampled were time and financial resources. Time is a finite resource for which the small businesses are constrained. Therefore, the proprietors of small businesses choose avenues that save time (Bridge, 2017). On this topic, the proprietor of SB-13 noted,

> I think that Facebook has a pretty good, like…coz you can pay to boost your post and it's
>
> not so very much, and it reaches a lot of further, and it's really cool cuz you can see, and
>
> it does not take as much time as you said time and… it is not as time-consuming.

This statement is an indication of the influence of both time and financial resources on the decision to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The proprietor highlights the importance that only a small amount of money is needed to boost the posts and it facilitates a wider reach compared to other traditional methods. Additionally, the

proprietor highlights the importance that using social media platforms is not as time-consuming as using other traditional methods of marketing.

On the same issue, the proprietor of SB-09 quipped,

Actually Facebook, other than if we choose to use the option which is to boost the post, it is free. So obviously feel like it's the best bang for the buck, because considering how many people are on it, vs. watching TV and listening to radio.

There are two factors of interest in this statement. Firstly, social media is of interest to the proprietor because the business does not incur any charges for the continued communication with customers. At a very basic level, the use of Facebook is free of any charges. However, users have an opportunity to pay to have their posts boosted in order to reach a large number of users. The second fact of interest according to the proprietor of SB-09 is that Facebook offers more value for the money invested in boosting the posts because more people are on the social media platform when compared to the number of people watching television or listening to the radio.

The resource-based view of the firm also highlighted the importance of competencies in the success of the business. Jurevicious (2013) highlighted these intangible resources. The intangible resources are in the form of soft resources and include the skills and capabilities that the proprietors of the small businesses require to use social media platforms for customer relationship management. There was a question in the data collection instrument asking the proprietors of the small businesses about their competencies to use social customer relationship management as well as competencies of their staff. One of the emerging patterns was that some of the proprietors allowed their staff to participate in posting content and replying to comments on social media. The proprietor in SB-13 said, "Our staff, bartenders, cooks, and everything are

good about sharing our posts, commenting on our posts, like, hey come check this out, I

encourage them to do that." Other proprietors nominated one person who was adept at using

social media platforms to either post on behalf of the business or help develop content to be

posted on the business page. On this issue, the proprietor in SB-19 said,

> I do all of the Facebook stuff, I have a partner, we have a partner with the event outside
>
> that helps us, and he helped us do a lot of that, so we go on there and do videos, we
>
> interact with him, we talked with him, you know, a lot of them know what is happening.

In this case, only one of the staff members at the business is responsible for posting content on

the business page and engaging with the customers on behalf of the business. It is evident from

the proprietor's statement that he is adept in using social media platforms and knows how to

arouse the interest of the customers by posting interesting content.

Another concept related to the one on competencies is the reliance on assistance from

external companies. Bridge (2017) found that some proprietors of small businesses outsourced

the management of social media platforms. This is common when the proprietor is not adept in

the use of social customer relationship management and the staff do not have the required

competencies. The proprietor in SB-19 said, "We have a, we are actually getting ready to hire a

marketing company, yeah, called Q for Launch, anyway, we are probably going to be using

them." To introduce more context, the proprietor of the business reported that he was very

skilled in marketing. However, they still made the decision to contract an external company to

help with the management of their social media pages due to constraints in time among other

factors. On the same issue, the proprietor in SB-15 said,

First thing you wanted to do, there is a company that is located in Berkeley, that we use

for our a lot of like booking of our bands, a lot of our work as far as, they designed of our

logo, and they really help us a lot on these labels, our cans, t-shirts and stuff like alright.

It is evident that the proprietors of the small businesses are willing to supplement any

deficiencies within the business by contacting external companies to bridge the gaps.

The review of the literature showed that the use of formalized marketing plans as

important for small businesses.  According to Marshall et al. (2012), a formalized marketing plan

is necessary for small businesses even though they are using social media as a framework for

customer relationship management.  The use of the formalized marketing plan benefits small

businesses by offering them an opportunity to develop a cohesive strategy for marketing and

customer communication.  Irrespective, Bridge (2017) found the use of a formalized marketing

plan is not common in all small businesses.  The findings of this study are consistent with what

was reported in the literature.  Almost no businesses that were sampled had a formalized

marketing plan.  When asked about its use, most of the proprietors responded that they did not

have a formalized marketing plan.  Instead, they relied on their intuition and experience to guide

their decisions and activities in marketing and customer communication.  On this issue, the

proprietor of SB-05 said, "No formal plan, I just kinda go with the feeling..."  Many proprietors

of small businesses were of this perspective.

Other small businesses had informal marketing plans.  The informal marketing plans

were characterized by scheduled events that occurred periodically.  Therefore, the proprietors of

the businesses have to prepare for these events in order to communicate with their target

audience in time and consistently.  When contributing on this issue, the proprietor in SB-10 said,

"It's pretty informal, typically we have a few special events of the year such as record store day,

I hope you're familiar with that, that's a pretty big deal, so we tend to build up for that." Even though such plans are informal, the fact that they are periodic and build around specific events makes them more reliable. This is because they communicate a consistent message around a specific event (Bridge, 2017).

However, it is worth noting that one business had a formalized marketing plan. SB-02 operated with a formal marketing plan that guided all the activities related to marketing and customer communication. The business also contracted an external agency that helps them create their brand and all the assets related to the brand. The images they used, their logo, the promotional material, and brand marketing images were all cohesive as guided by the formalized marketing plan.

The data collection instrument also explored the measurable impact that the proprietors of small businesses could see from the use of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. According to Bridge (2017), social media can help small businesses increase customer loyalty, customer satisfaction, and sales volume if it is applied well. There are varied responses from the business example as to whether social customer relationship management led to an increase in customer loyalty. Some of the proprietors agreed that they had seen an increase in customer loyalty since they had been using social customer relationship management. The proprietor of SB-07 said, "Yeah, just increased followers is a real numerical thing, and I do track that." In this instance, the proprietor of the business was able to see an increase in the followers of the business because of their activity in social media.

On the same issue, the proprietor in SB-12 said,

I think we just noticed those things a little bit more, like I said, we typically see patients

once a year, and this gives us a touch point, sometimes, a patient will say  oh gosh, I gatta

come and see you guys, I need an appointment.

This was a business where the proprietor saw his patients once every year.  The proprietor

reported that social media allowed the customers to remain in contact with the business

throughout the year and prompt for appointments whenever they needed them.

Other proprietors were not sure that there had been any notable increase in customer

loyalty.  The proprietor in SB-04 said, "I am not sure it has increased customer loyalty, we have

a pretty high return rate anyway, but I almost have to say yes because there is some pretty

regular engagement in our postings."  While the proprietor could not certainly say that there had

been an increase in customer loyalty, he noted that since they had been using social media for

customer relationship management, the engagement with their postings had been quite regular.

On the same issue, the proprietor in SB-17 said, "I do not know that social media has necessarily

helped, but I know it has not hurt either."  This was among the many other proprietors who did

not note any measurable impact due to the use of social media as a framework for customer

relationship management.

**Relationship of themes/patterns to research questions**.  In addition to the one

overarching research question, this study also had five other specific questions that guided the

qualitative inquiry.  The data collection instrument was designed so that it can help collect the

data required to answer the five specific research questions.  The themes discussed above relate

to the research questions in different ways.  The following discusses this relationship using

specific examples from the transcripts.

The first research question was the awareness level of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. The analysis of data showed the proprietors of the small businesses were aware that social media can be used as a framework for customer relationship management. The proprietors of the small businesses were aware of virtually all the mainstream social media platforms that are available presently. The proprietors are also aware that social media platforms can also be used for business communication in addition to personal communication. All the 20 businesses sampled were active in at least one social media platform. Some of the businesses were active in more than one social media platform. The most commonly used social media platform was Facebook. The businesses that are active in more than one social media platform also included Instagram or Twitter.

The proprietors of the small businesses were aware of how to use social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management. All the 20 businesses that were sampled used the social media platforms to communicate with their customers. The communication was two way. The businesses in the restaurant or food service industry used social media platforms to communicate their specials and promotions to their customers. The communication was both in the form of text and images. They would take pictures of their menus or food products and upload them on social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram to attract the insights and feedback of the customers. The businesses operating in the outdoor industry would include images promoting the tourist attractions is a state. The proprietor in SB-06 said, "What I do is I put on recipes, I put lots of pictures of West Virginia that have come across my… and beautiful fall weather, so I try to like promote the state and what is going on." The businesses operating in

the retail industry would communicate their products and any promotions to the customers using social media platforms.

The proprietors of small businesses are also aware that they can use social media platforms to gather information but is vital for their businesses from the target audience. The owners of the businesses sampled showed an awareness that they can learn about the perceptions of the customers about the businesses, the products on offer, as well as their business processes. This information can be in the form of negative or positive perceptions. Even when feedback is not given directly, the proprietors of small businesses know that they can make inferences from the information gathered through their interaction with the customers. The proprietor of SB-01 said, "There are a few things that you can infer from the way that people interact with you; it's not always definite."

The proprietors of the small businesses are also aware that they can collect information that can help them in improving the targeting practice. The proprietor of SB-13 said, "...he can pull and see who has seen or viewed our posts, who has shared them, we can see who our audience are targeting…" The proprietors can then use this information in order to target the customers who show interest in their business for more specificity and conversion. On this issue, the proprietor in SB-01 said,

> Facebook interest-targeting capability is giant, for us it's probably the most important thing, and if I created an ad where it's just like I wanna reach everybody in West Virginia, I wanna reach everybody in Ohio, versus an ad where say I wanna reach everyone in Ohio who has an interest in outdoor recreation, white water rafting, zip lining, hiking, I know that the results are going to be much better for that more finely targeted interest ad than they are for everybody, because I am not reaching people who

have zero interest, am spending money to target those folks whereas… I can get those

people.

This quote shows that the proprietors are able to collect social media data to help them determine

how to target their customers in a more effective way in order to get more conversion.  It also

shows the proprietors of small businesses are aware that social media platforms offer more

opportunities than for business improvement than just uploading posts and images.

The second research question was the influence of resources on the use or failure to use

social customer relationship management by proprietors of small businesses in Southern West

Virginia.  The resource-based view of the firm holds water resources and competencies are

important predictors of success among small businesses (Jurevicious, 2013).  Financial resources

are finite.  The lack of financial resources might prevent the proprietors of small businesses from

investing in customer relationship management particularly because of the high capital

requirements for setting up mainstream customer relationship management infrastructure.

However, social media offers a reprieve because it allows the proprietors of small businesses to

engage in customer relationship management at a fraction of the cost (Srivastava et al., 1998).

The analysis of the data showed that resources were an influential factor in the decision

to use social customer relationship management.  The proprietor of SB-06 said, "I have found

that radios and newspapers are extraordinarily expensive, they run one time or a few times, and

they just did not work for me."  The other context of this quote was that the proprietor justified

the decision to stop the use of traditional channels of advertisement such as newspapers and

radio by citing their expensive nature and low return on investment.  Considering their resource

limitations, they decided to employ social customer relationship management.  Time was also a

constraining factor for many of the small businesses.  The proprietor of SB-17 said,

It saves time, we really have a crunch for time, it's really hard, you know, I am doing six

different jobs when I'm here, so I have got to make the most use of that time that I am

spending on social media for that purpose.

Therefore, some of the owners of these businesses decided to use social customer relationship

management because it was less laborious and time-consuming compared to the traditional

avenues of customer engagement.

The third research question was the perceptions of the proprietors of small businesses in

Southern West Virginia regarding the use of social customer relationship management. The

aspect of interest here was whether the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia

felt that social customer relationship management was suitable, the negative experiences relating

to the use of social customer relationship management, and their opinions on how social media

can be used effectively as a framework for social customer relationship management.

The analysis of the data showed that the proprietors of small businesses were positive

about the suitability of social customer relationship management. The proprietors of the small

businesses reported that social media offered them a competitive advantage. The proprietor of

SB-03 said, "You can get that bi-directional communication so that you get back from them what

you may be lacking or what you may need to have in terms of the customer relationship." Social

customer relationship management is suitable because if allowed bidirectional communication

between the proprietor and the customer.

Social customer relationship management is also suitable because it allows the proprietor

to deal with the issues raised by the customers in real time. Because social media platforms are

available on mobile devices such as smartphones allows the proprietors of the small businesses

to remain in contact with the customers even when they are not at the business premises. On this issue, the proprietor of SB-16 said,

> It helps them to reach us in other areas where they can't, like if there is not a manager here, because again, I can't be here every day, the owner can't be here every day, so if there is something wrong, they can message me, and I will fix it for them, so I definitely think it's not bad.

Dealing with the concerns of the customers in real time is likely to affect their satisfaction positively.

Other proprietors felt that social customer relationship management was suitable because it helped them address their resource limitations will also allowing the customer to co-create value for the business. The proprietor for SB-12 said,

> Suitability, yes, it is practical, it is, primarily free because we do not have to pay for that time, and I think that since everybody or most people are on it, or at least aware of it, and people bring it up all the time, so I am on Facebook or, I think the interaction is what makes it, people like to interact, whether you are the owner of a hotdog stand, a bar or huge business, you know, when someone interacts with the owner, they feel vested.

Because social media platforms are free makes them suitable for small businesses that may not have large budgets to spend on customer relationship management or marketing.

The proprietors were asked to report any negative experiences they might have had using social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Understanding the negative experiences were necessary in order to figure out what small businesses could do in order to maximize the potential that social media presents for customer relationship management. The main negative experience highlighted was negative publicity that some of the small businesses

experienced because of comments made by their customers on social media platforms. Some of the proprietors were candid enough to accept that they were at fault. However, they also said they would have preferred an opportunity to address the issues with the customers individually and privately. Negative publicity has the potential to ruin the reputation of a business. It is more disconcerting when the negative publicity is the result of unfounded claims from a disgruntled customer as was the case for some of the small businesses.

Other proprietors felt that even with the negative experiences associated with the use of social customer relationship management, it was still a necessary avenue for small businesses to engage with customers. The proprietor in SB-06 said, "Yeah, I don't think it's just suitable; I think it is absolutely necessary; you can't ignore that in this day and age." The proprietors of small businesses need to learn how to manage the negative feedback coming from the customers. Some of the proprietors reported they used the negative experiences as opportunities to learn how to improve their communication with their customers.

The fourth research question was the effect that the use of social customer relationship management has on customer engagement and loyalty. Bridge (2017) argued that businesses could use social media to help increase engagement with their customers. He also argued that businesses could enhance customer loyalty by engaging with their customers over social media platforms. According to Parsons (2013), businesses should use social media as a forum for open engagement with the customers rather than replicate the information that they have in the other channels of communication such as business websites. The open engagement entails allowing the customers to air their grievances and for the owners of the businesses to respond to the grievances in an open and satisfactory manner. According to Bridge (2017), customers are likely to feel closer to businesses where their concerns are addressed.

The findings of the study were consistent with these arguments. Many of the small businesses found that the use of social customer relationship management enhanced customer engagement. It was easy for customers to engage with the owners of the businesses because the engagement occurred in channels that the customers already used frequently for personal communication. The proprietor of SB-13 reported that social media gives customers a level of confidence that they may not have if they were to speak to the owners of the businesses face to face. The proprietor said, "...like sometimes customers don't speak up from in here, so they go to Facebook, and they leave a review." From this statement, one can gather that social media helps facilitate engagement for this type of customers.

Other proprietors argued that social media facilitates customer engagement by making it easier for the customers to reach the owners of the small businesses as well as eliminating the formality that characterizes the traditional means of customer relationship management. The owner of SB-11 reported,

> Well, pretty much it is an ease of touching base with, they can't get ahold of you there, so it is a, you know, when you get into the relationship part, part of it with the management, its personal cuz it's like a fun call.

Eliminating the formalities in the engagement between the customers and the owners of the small businesses is likely to encourage more communication. However, there is the challenge that without the formality, the owners have to rely on inferences in order to derive meaning from the messages sent by the customers.

The fifth research question was the difference in the ability of the small businesses that use social customer relationship management to attract and retain customers compared to the small businesses that do not use social customer relationship management in Southern West

Virginia. All the small businesses sampled in this study used social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Social media offers an avenue to attract new customers by offering opportunities for marketing. Social media also offers an avenue to retain customers by facilitating the development of customer loyalty. The proprietor of SB-09 said,

> Oh yeah, we definitely feel that using social media is important. As far as how its ties to a marketing plan, it's I mean, how we do our advertising, we also do videos to let people see, what we are doing here.

After attracting customers, the proprietors of the small businesses can work on retaining them by enhancing the quality of engagement. They can also work on retaining the customers by sustaining the marketing communication so that the customers are always informed of the developments in the product lines as well as ever offerings of the business. Personal social media posts can also be used to encourage customer engagement as well as strengthen customer loyalty (Agnihorti et al., 2012).

**Summary of the findings**. The proprietors of the small businesses showed an awareness of the fact that social media can be used effectively as a framework for social customer relationship management. The proprietors were aware that social media platforms are not just used for personal communication; they were also aware that they could be used for business communication. The proprietors of all the businesses sampled for the study were aware of the common social media platforms used presently. The proprietors of the small businesses reported using at least one of the social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management. Many of the proprietors reported using more than one social media platform in order to maintain a multi-channel communication with their customers.

The proprietors of the small businesses also showed awareness of how to use social media platforms to engage with the customers. They would post content in either text or graphic form to not only initiate engagement with the customers but also solicit their feedback. The proprietors of the small businesses are also aware that they can gather data about their customers and the perceptions of their customers about their brand, products, and services through social media. The proprietors showed awareness about information capture. When the feedback was not given directly, the proprietors showed an awareness of making inferences from the information collected in order to learn what their customers felt about various aspects of the business.

The findings showed that resources were a significant factor influencing the decision by the proprietors of small businesses to choose social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The resources of significance according to the participants were time and money. Many of the proprietors of small businesses are constrained for time. Therefore, they require platforms that are not laborious and time-consuming. Some of the owners who were interviewed argued that social media allows them to accomplish various tasks within a short period.

Concerning financial resources, the proprietors hailed social media for being cost-effective. They highlighted that it was free of charge unless one elected to pay to have their posts boosted in order to have a wider reach. Even when one decided to pay to have their posts boosted, the unit cost was lower compared to the other traditional methods of marketing communication. Additionally, the return on investment was good because the social media platforms allow for specific targeting so that the marketing communication is directed to people who are interested in the business or the products that the business has to offer.

The proprietors of the small businesses were positive about the suitability of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. They highlighted the various reasons on which their perceptions were based. Firstly, social media allows them to address the concerns of the customers in real time even when they are not at the business premises (e.g., social media platforms are available on mobile devices such as smartphones). Secondly, social media was a suitable framework for customer relationship management because it allowed the small businesses to circumvent the resource limitations with which they were faced. Time and finances were highlighted as important resources for small businesses. Time and finances are also finite resources. Because social media is not resource-intensive makes it a proper framework through which the proprietors of the small businesses can engage in the all-important customer relationship management. Thirdly, the proprietors thought social media was a suitable framework for customer relationship management because it allowed a bi-directional engagement with the customers.

The proprietors of the small businesses reported both positive and negative experiences using social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Although they emphasized the negative experiences more than the positive experiences, it was noteworthy that they regarded the negative experiences as opportunities to learn how to use the technology more effectively and how to communicate with their customers. The main negative experience that was highlighted was the negative publicity resulting from unfavorable comments by customers on the social media platforms. Even with these negative experiences, most of the proprietors of the small businesses were of the opinion that social media is not only suitable; it is also necessary, particularly during the technology era in which contemporary businesses operate.

The findings also showed the use of social customer relationship management helps businesses increase customer engagement and customer loyalty.  It was beneficial for the proprietors of the small businesses to use social media platforms because the customers were already available in the communication channels.  Therefore, it did not take any effort on the part of the customer to find the proprietors of the small businesses because they were already using the same communication channels.  Most of the proprietors reported improvements in customer engagement with the business and its products.  Increased customer engagement partially influenced an increase in customer loyalty.

Finally, the findings showed that social media offered the proprietors of small business improved opportunities to attract and retain their customers.  Social media facilitated attracting new customers by offering numerous opportunities for marketing.  Social media also facilitated opportunities for the proprietors of small businesses to retain customers.  The proprietors of small businesses can retain customers through constant customer engagement.  The proprietors of small businesses can retain customers through constant and quality customer engagement.  The proprietors of small businesses can also retain the customers by constantly posting marketing communication content in order to keep their customers informed of changes in the product line, product quality, and other elements is a business.

**Applications to Professional Practice**

The general problem addressed in the qualitative study was the lack of awareness among the proprietors of small businesses on social customer relationship management practices, a finding that was made by Bridge (2017).  It was hypothesized that the lack of awareness prevented them from realizing the potential that using social media platforms has in aiding engagement with their customers.  The findings from the study contradict the hypothesis on

which the general problem was based.  The study showed the proprietors of small businesses in

Southern West Virginia had a high level of awareness of social media platforms and the potential

they have for customer relationship management.  The proprietors of the small businesses were

not only aware of the social media platforms that are applicable for business communication, but

they were also aware of how to use them to enhance customer engagement and also generate

value for the small businesses.

The resources available to the proprietors of the small businesses were also highlighted in

the background of this qualitative study.  According to Intralak and Olsson (2011), the

inadequacy of resources is a common problem for many small businesses.  The few available

resources have to be divided on a priority basis to the various needs.  According to Srivastava

(2012), the technological solutions that are required by the proprietors of the small businesses to

run an efficient customer relationship management program suffer as the investment of the few

available resources is prioritized to other business functions.  The resource limitations

notwithstanding, customer relationship management remains an important marketing function for

small businesses if they are to remain competitive against their competitors and ensure their

financial and business survival.  The proprietors of small businesses need to forge and sustain

strong relationships with their customers in order to remain competitive and to enhance business

success (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

The implications of the arguments above are that irrespective of the resource limitations

for the proprietors of the small businesses, the need to engage in customer relationship

management is inevitable for the survival of their businesses.  For this and other reasons, the

findings of this qualitative study are relevant to improve business practice.  The findings from

the data gathered from the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia have

implications for the larger small business community. The findings of this qualitative study are significant to the proprietors of small businesses looking to overcome the challenges arising from the limited resources they have. The following paragraphs will discuss these implications as they relate to the applications of the findings from this study in the business context. The following paragraphs also feature a discussion on the implications of the findings of the qualitative study to the field of study and the biblical framework on which the study was based.

The main finding of the study as guided by the first research question was that there was a high level of awareness among the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia about the use of social media platforms for business communication and the potential it has to enhance customer relationship management. This finding is relevant to improved business practice. Harrigan and Miles (2014) had noted there was a low utilization of social media by the proprietors of small businesses. Similar findings were reported by Bridge (2017). The two reports attributed the failure to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management to the lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses of the potential that social media platforms hold. This qualitative study found the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia used the social media platform to enhance customer engagement. The high level of awareness about the use of social media platforms is beneficial to the improvement of business practice among the proprietors of small businesses.

The high level of awareness among the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia about the potential of social media as a framework for customer relationship management shows the owners of the businesses are ready to exploit the available opportunities. According to Cesaroni and Consoli (2015), the opportunities presented by the web technologies offer small enterprises a chance to overcome the challenges for growth posed by their small size.

For a long time, the smallness of a small business has been a liability.  In addition to the small

size of the businesses, the financial resources are also limited and have been founded by

Harrigan and Miles (2014) to be an impediment to the owners of the small businesses when

attempting to adapt technologies aimed at customer relationship management.

Cesaroni and Consoli (2015) argued that the opportunities presented by web

technologies, particularly the social media platforms, serve to encourage the small businesses

towards growth and development.  The opportunities are available social media platforms help

the proprietors of the small businesses to develop new products, venture into new markets, and

challenge for more market share in the existing markets and the new markets.  The opportunities

in social media platforms also help give the proprietors of the small businesses new competitive

advantages that they can use to enhance their growth and development (Cesaroni & Consoli,

2015).

In assessing the awareness of the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West

Virginia, the researcher found that the business owners regarded the opportunities for customer

engagement brought about by social media platforms highly.  The proprietors of the small

businesses showed an affinity for knowledge in order to increase the uptake of the social media

platforms because of a competitive advantage that the platforms give them compared to the

erstwhile measures.

The high level of awareness has implications for improved business practice.  According

to Payne and Frow (2006), the proprietors of small businesses are aware of the potential that

social media has as a framework for customer relationship management helps improve

performance through intangible benefits.  Some of the intangible benefits include a higher

perception of quality of service, customer satisfaction, and customer engagement.  This argument

is demonstrated in the findings of this qualitative study as the researcher found that the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia already used social media platforms to enhance customer engagement. Many of the proprietors of the small businesses who were interviewed reported there was increased customer engagement as a result of the use of various social media platforms. Zamil (2011) also argued that the use of social media as a framework for customer relationship management improves business practices for small business owners by enhancing their marketing functions. The results of enhanced marketing functions include a high rate of return customers due to the probability of increased customer satisfaction.

The second research question explored the influence of resources on the decisions by the proprietors of small businesses to use social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management. The influence of resources on the decisions by the owners of small businesses to not invest in customer relationship management was one of the bases on which this qualitative study was founded. According to Dargam et al. (2012), the owners of the small businesses lack the financial power that is required to invest in the software, tools, and other infrastructure associated with mainstream customer relationship management. Bridge (2017) also highlighted the challenges that the limited financial power of most small businesses posed to the effort of the business to engage in customer relationship management. The findings of the study in relation to the second research question are relevant to improved business practice, particularly considering the importance of customer relationship management to the overall competitiveness and survival of the small businesses (Harrigan & Miles, 2014; Bridge, 2017).

Social customer relationship management can improve business practices in small businesses. Social media platforms provide cost-effective decision support systems (Dargam et al., 2012). The platforms help the proprietors of the small businesses to engage in customer

relationship management even with the limited financial resources by using the available digital

communication channels.  Social media platforms are also beneficial when it comes to

advertisement.  The researcher learned from the proprietors of the small businesses who are

sampled in Southern West Virginia that opportunities available in the social media platforms are

more cost-effective when compared to the advertising opportunities available in mainstream

media.  Facebook, for instance, allows its users to boost their posts in order to get a wider reach.

The unit cost for boosting a post significantly smaller compared to the unit cost incurred when

using mainstream advertising channels.  The reduced price would ideally allow the proprietors of

small businesses to advertise more for the same amount of money compared to using mainstream

advertising channels.  The effect is that the proprietors of the small businesses are not only able

to engage with the customers, they are also able to increase their advertising activities.

Increasing advertising activities is beneficial to the proprietors of small businesses because it

increases the visibility of the business, the products, and services on offer as well as the brand

name.

The findings of the qualitative study are relevant to improved business practices because

social customer relationship management facilitates the generation of value.  In addition to the

themes that were predicted in the literature review, the analysis of the data collected for the

proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia also highlighted concepts such as

customer engagement and customer loyalty.  According to Gecti and Zengin (2013), the

proprietors of the small businesses can engage with their customers by identifying

communication messages that reverberate with them.  The proprietors of small businesses can

create value by communicating their brand and brand values to the customers.  The creation of

value in social customer relationship management is two way.  In addition to the effects of the

business owners, Bradley and McDonald (2011) recommended that the proprietors of small businesses should mobilize their customers to engage with the business using social media platforms. One of the ways of core creating value identified by the researcher during the analysis of the data collected from the owners of small businesses in Southern West Virginia was the use of the feedback provided by the customers to enhance decision making on product development. Involving the customers in the value creation process helps the proprietors of small businesses to co-create value that is sustainable (Biggemann et al., 2014).

Part of the findings of this qualitative study showed the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia did not use formalized marketing plans. The review of the literature shows the use of formalized marketing plans was minimal in many of the small businesses (Payne & Frow, 2006). The findings of the study did not contradict what was highlighted in the literature. Bridge (2017) suggested that it is not effective for the proprietors of small businesses to use just social media as their sole marketing strategy. Instead, the proprietors of small businesses should have formalized marketing plans that should guide the use of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Ideal marketing plans contain various features, some of which include how to enhance customer loyalty, the modalities for managing customer engagement, the strategies to attract and retain new customers, marketing communication, and the communication of the products and services on offer.

Eriksson and Larsson (2014) also opined that social media platforms should be used to facilitate improved customer relationship rather than as the only marketing strategy used by the proprietors of small businesses. Orenga-Rogla and Chalmeta (2016) also argued that social media platforms should be included to enhance the effectiveness of existing marketing strategies. Citing these arguments and that most of the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West

Virginia did not have formalized marketing plans, the findings of this study are relevant to

improving current business practices.  According to Shehu (2018), formalizing the use of social

media as a framework for customer relationship management is important in order to inject

effectiveness into the marketing communication activities of the proprietors of small businesses.

While analysing the use of social media among the small and medium enterprises in Namibia,

Shehu (2018) found that one of the impediments for formalizing the use of social media

platforms among the proprietors of the small businesses in the country included the lack of deep

knowledge in analyzing the audience, campaigns, and developing proper strategies.

As a result, many of the proprietors of small businesses in the country did not realize the

full benefits of using social media as a framework for customer relationship management.  The

findings of this study that many of the proprietors of the small businesses did not use formalized

marketing plan highlight the need to inform the business owners of the potential that formalizing

the use of social media has for their businesses.  According to Shehu (2018), some of the benefits

the proprietors of the small businesses can expect by using formalized marketing plans include

the enhancement of business intelligence and the use of the business intelligence to not only

create brands but also communicate them to the customers.  In addition, Shehu (2018) found that

the use of analytics could assist the proprietors of small businesses in enhancing brand

storytelling, the generation of content and visual communication.

Harrigan and Miles (2014) also contributed to the debate on formalizing the use of social

media by proprietors of small businesses.  Of the seven themes that were highlighted during the

review of the literature, Harrigan and Miles (2014) highlighted social media support as one of the

functions that might help proprietors of small businesses to increase their sales as well as

customer engagement.  Social customer relationship management has more benefits for the

proprietors of small businesses than just facilitating engagement between them and their customers. The proprietors of the small businesses can use the data they gather from and about the customers over social media platforms to support the development of strategic decisions that might be beneficial in enhancing revenue generation.

However, one of the caveats related to the use of data collected from social media platforms is that it is challenging to analyze the data compared to the data collected using mainstream customer relationship management software (Chen et al., 2012). Formalizing the use of social media platforms would entail developing strategies for the use of analytics. Analyzing the data collected from social media platforms can help the proprietors of small businesses to calculate the retention rate and customer lifetime value. These are important indicators when making decisions on customers and marketing communication.

On the same issue, Harrigan and Miles (2014) highlighted that owners of small businesses are preoccupied with the decisions that relate to the daily operations and marketing functions of the small businesses as an impediment for the use of social media data to calculate complex indicators that can help them focus on the long-term success of their businesses. Some of the important indicators the proprietors of small businesses can calculate using the data gathered from social media platforms include customer referral value, the lifetime value of a customer, and the rate at which the customers shared information (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

The findings of this qualitative study showed the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia did not benefit from these complex indicators. Therefore, the adoption of formalized marketing plans can help the proprietors of the small businesses to improve their business practices, particularly as they relate to social media data capture and social media support for decision-making, and the use of the information captured (Harrigan & Miles, 2014).

This information can be communicated to the owners of small businesses to increase the seriousness with which they use social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management and to make them aware there is potential in using social media platforms than just engaging either customers.

Overall, the findings of this qualitative study can be used to encourage the proprietors of small businesses to adopt technology as a way of enhancing their business practices. More importantly, the findings of this study can be used to encourage the proprietors of small businesses to adopt social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The owners of small businesses in Southern West Virginia are already using social media platforms to enhance customer engagement. The findings of the study showed that many of them reported an improvement in business practices, particularly those that relate to customer engagement, enhancing customer loyalty, and the advertisement of the products and services.

These arguments have been supported by empirical data gained from research. According to Cesaroni and Consoli (2015), social media networks are rising in significance as a popular tool for the proprietors of small businesses world over. In Italy, for instance, 51.9% of the businesses that employ at least 250 people are using social media platforms. When the small medium enterprises were surveyed for the popularity of the tools that they use to support customer engagement, only 10.3% of the businesses ranked their websites as the most popular technological tools. A significantly larger 29.3% of the businesses ranked social media networks as the most popular technological tool (Cesaroni & Consoli, 2015).

The uptake of social media platforms has increased among the proprietors of small businesses in the United States of America. A study performed by Meske and Stieglitz (2013) found that 24% of the small businesses operating in the United States of America had formalized

the use of social media platforms.  Meske and Stieglitz (2013) also found that another 20% of the proprietors of small businesses operating in the United States of America still used social media platform even though it was in an informal way.  Many of the proprietors of the small businesses who were sampled in Southern West Virginia belong to the group of small businesses using social media platforms in an informal manner.  The findings of this study are not only appropriate for encouraging the general adoption of social media platforms as a framework for customer relationship management, but they also to encourage the use of formalized marketing plans in order to position the proprietors of small businesses to realize the benefits highlighted earlier.

Van Duzer (2010) argued that businesses require support in order to survive.  The use of social media for advertising purposes helps the proprietors of small businesses to increase sales as was found in this qualitative study.  Social media platforms help propagate the word of mouth and interest in small businesses.  While the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia reported using the social media platforms for advertising purposes, they underscored the importance of creating a mutually beneficial relationship with the customers.  The customers targeted by small businesses are varied in their demographic attributes.  Therefore, the owners of small businesses need to communicate a consistent message with the target audience while packaging the message in a unique way that relates to individual customers.  This implies the proprietors of the small businesses need to tailor their content so that while speaking a consistent message, they also meet the communication needs of the target audience in various demographic categories.

There is a need to use a variety of formats for packaging the message for the target audience.  As the researcher found out through the analysis of the data, a combination of text,

videos, hashtags, and images can enhance the effectiveness of using social media platforms for customer engagement.  Considering that social media platforms offer two-way communication, the owners of small businesses are likely to get feedback from the target audience.  As the researcher found out in this qualitative study, the feedback is a blend of negative and positive perceptions about various aspects of the business, products, services, or the brand itself.  The manner in which the proprietors of small businesses handle the feedback is crucial for continued customer engagement.  Bridge (2017) found that praising the customers who give positive feedback shows that the business cares and is likely to encourage repeat business.  Bridge (2017) also found that handling negative feedback in a cordial and civil away allows the proprietor of the small business to address the issue raised by the customer without necessarily alienating them away from the business.

The findings of this study have implications in relation to the biblical framework on which this qualitative study was based.  One Biblical teaching that provided a framework for this study was,

> For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.  Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching. (Romans 12:4-7. English Standard Version)

It is likely the proprietors of small businesses may not have the skills to use social media as a framework for customer relationship management.  This Biblical teaching teaches the proprietors of the small businesses to rely on the other members who have the necessary gifts. The analysis of the data collected from the business owners in Southern West Virginia showed the application

of these teachings.  The proprietors of small businesses who did not have the skills to use social

media as a framework for customer relationship management identified the employees who had

the skills to do it on their behalf.  Other business relied on external assistance by contracting

companies to manage social media platforms on their behalf.  This is encouraging for the

business owners who fail to use social media platforms because they lack the requisite skills.

The Bible teaches they can rely on the gifts that fellow members have been given.  The

implication is the proprietors of the small businesses who do not have the requisite skills need

not miss the potential of social media platforms.  They can hire people who are conversant with

using social media the framework for customer relationship management to manage the social

media platforms on behalf of the business.

> Keller and Alsdorf (2012) wrote,

> The Spirit does not make us wise in any magical kind of way, giving us little nudges and
>
> insider tips to help us always choose the best stock to invest in.  Rather, he makes Jesus
>
> Christ a living, bright reality, transforming our character, giving us new inner poise,
>
> clarity, humility, boldness, contentment, and courage.  All of this leads to increasing
>
> wisdom and to better and better decisions. (p. 212)

The use of social media platforms allows customers to act as insiders in a business.  They various

within the business where our address is needed.  These areas could range from the various

business processes, the quality of the products and services, and the effectiveness of customer

communication among others.  The proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia

highlighted this finding.  These are the "little nudges and insider tips" to which Keller and

Alsdorf (2012) refer.  The owners of small businesses can use them to improve various aspects

of the business.  The biblical teaching also builds on the resource-based view of the firm, one of

the two theories informing qualitative study's conceptual framework. They include wisdom, commitment, courage, clarity of thought, and inner poise that God gives his followers are the rare resources the proprietors of the small businesses can use to generate a competitive advantage.

**Recommendations for Action**

Various recommendations for action by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia stem for the findings of this qualitative study. The proprietors of small businesses should identify the social media platforms on which the target audience are found. The owners of the small businesses who were interviewed in Southern West Virginia identified the customer demographics as one of the ways of determining the social media platforms they were likely using. While studying the customer demographics, it behoves the proprietors of the small businesses also to learn the behaviors of their target audience. The purchase and online behaviors of the customers are important when determining the type of messages and content to be used. These types of preparations are important to enable the proprietors of small businesses to realize the impact that social media platforms can have on customer engagement. In the same breath, the purpose of the small businesses should base their decisions on which social media platform to use on the preferences of the customers rather than their competencies.

The researcher found the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia used social media platforms on which most of the customers could be found. However, a small percentage of the business owners reported they used the social media platforms on which they were most competent irrespective of whether or not the social media platform most popular with the target audience. It is easier for the owners of the small businesses to learn how to use social

media platforms or employ someone who is competent in its use for business purposes than get the target audience to change social media platforms.

It is also recommended for the providers of small businesses to use analytics to maximize the impact of social media platforms. Harrigan and Miles (2014) decried that the providers of the small businesses did not use social media platforms to analyze complex indicators such as the lifetime value of customers and customer retention rate among others. The researcher found the proprietors of small businesses were aware of analytics even though very few of them used to them to benefit their business. The owners of the small businesses can use Google analytics to access the various tools that may be needed to analyze the data in order to get a deep understanding of their customers, their behaviors, and the return on the money invested in advertising. The owners of the small business will increase the focus on long-term viability as recommended by Harrigan and Miles (2014).

It is recommended for the proprietors of small businesses to handle all feedback with positivity. The proprietors of the small businesses highlighted that they got both positive and negative feedback from the customers. It is relatively easier to address positive feedback because most of the time it is in praise of one aspect of the business or another. Addressing negative feedback may be challenging because it is often critical of the business. The proprietors of small businesses should show a willingness to listen to the feedback given by the customers because it also presents learning opportunities. Negative feedback is inevitable in business because they are there to serve the customers. The manner in which the owners of the small businesses deal with negative feedback will indicate the customer orientation of the business. The owners of small businesses who deal with negative comments in an acrimonious and

unprofessional way are likely to lose in the end, especially when the threads of such

communication are available for other customers to view.

It is recommended for the proprietors of the small businesses to use a conversational tone

when posting on social media platforms. Social media platforms offer opportunities for two-way

interaction that was not available in the traditional avenues for customer communication. Many

of the proprietors of small businesses who were interviewed in this study recommended the use

of an informal tone when dealing with customers on social media platforms. An informal,

conversational tone welcomes the customers to engage with the owners of their businesses

through their posts and other communication channels in the social media platforms. An

informal, conversational tone also encourages customers to initiate engagement. According to

Bridge (2017), using an informal, conversational tone also encourages the customers to share the

social media posts, a factor that facilitates more visibility and a wider reach. The owners of

small businesses can implement this recommendation by interspersing informational content

with posts influenced by the interests of the customers. The owners of small businesses can also

implement this recommendation by personalizing communication with individual customers.

The findings of the study are likely to impact the owners of small businesses directly and

the customers in an indirect manner. The findings of the study reiterate the importance of social

media as a framework for customer relationship management. The findings of this study inform

the owners of the small businesses that they do not need to miss the benefits of running a

customer relationship management program because of the resource limitations. Using social

media as a framework for customer relationship management helps small businesses benefit from

customer relationship management without the requirement for a huge financial investment. The

findings of the study also inform the owners of small businesses about changes they can make to

position the business to benefit more from social media platforms. The recommendations made above feature calls to action that if implemented well, can improve the business practices and position the small businesses towards long-term viability and success.

There is also an indirect impact on customers who are targeted by small businesses. The findings of this study provide know-how for the proprietors to enhance customer engagement. The customers are likely to enjoy an improved customer experience when the proprietors of the small business implement the recommended calls for action. The customers are likely to be involved in the value creation process through opportunities to comment and offer their feedback on various aspects of the business processes, the products, and services on offer.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

While assessing the perceptions of the proprietors of the small businesses on the impact of social customer relationship management on the business, the researcher identified that the business owners used various indicators. Some of the indicators were subjective, while others were empirical. Future studies can attempt to develop a model that contains outcomes that can be used to benchmark success for small businesses using social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Some of the empirical indicators employed by the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia to measure the success of their activities on social media include the number of people who liked their posts and the number of times their posts were shared. This is not an effective empirical indicator of success because the number of likes and shares do not necessarily translate into conversion for the small business owners. Therefore, the researcher reiterates the need for a model that the owners of small businesses can use to benchmark the success of social customer relationship management across different industries and customer demographics.

Harrigan and Miles (2014) emphasized the need for proprietors of small businesses to use analytics to derive more insights from social media data. The research found the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the concept of analytics. However, many of them did not use analytics to draw more in-depth insights from social media data. Future studies should establish whether the failure to use analytics is prevalent among the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia. Future studies should also explore whether this trend is exclusive to the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia or whether it is also replicated in other geographical locations. The studies should also explore the reasons the proprietors of small businesses do not use analytics.

There were various limitations to the study. Firstly, the researcher used a small sample size of 20 proprietors of small businesses. Larger sample size would help reduce the margin of error while also enhancing the saturation of the data collected from the participants. Secondly, the qualitative study was confined to the proprietors of small businesses within the four, county chambers of commerce in Southern West Virginia. There is an aspect of geographical representation. However, the sample was not representative of the entire United States of American. Thirdly, the sample was not representative of all the ethnicities within the United States of America. It is possible that the inclusion of minority communities and population groups would have raised new perspectives that were not captured in the findings of this study. In view of these limitations, it is recommended for future studies to use larger sample sizes. It is also recommended for studies on small businesses with a representative national sample in order to understand the influence of social media platforms as frameworks for customer relationship management in the entire country. A study and research on small businesses in other countries

are also necessary.  It is also recommended to create a clustered sample including ethnic,

minority, and women-owned businesses.

**Reflections**

The data collection process was very challenging.  One of the problems encountered

during the data collection process was finding small businesses that belonged to the chambers of

commerce in the rural area.  The inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted in this study were very

specific to the type of businesses that could be selected for the study.  Particularly, the inclusion

and exclusion criteria were specific on the number of businesses that could be sampled from a

given county chamber of commerce.  The implication is that only a specific number of

businesses could be sampled from one county chamber of commerce and the researcher could

not sample more from a specific chamber of commerce to compensate for any difficulties in

getting the full number of businesses from another county chamber of commerce.

Another challenge during the data collection process was getting an appointment from the

proprietors of small businesses.  Time is a valuable but limited resource for small businesses in

Southern West Virginia.  Many prospective business owners were not willing to commit the time

to participate in this study.  Some of the proprietors who accepted to participate in the study

looked hurried when answering the questions at first.  There were interruptions during certain

interviews as the owners of the small businesses went to tend to a customer or address an issue

raised by the employees.  Despite these challenges, the interviews were performed as stated in

the study protocol and in keeping with the best practices of data collection.

One of the preconceived ideas with which the researcher went during the data collection

process was the proprietors of the small businesses would contract employees or external

companies to help manage their social media platform.  However, this idea was nullified during

the data collection process as many of the owners of the small businesses reported that they manage their own social media platforms. Very few proprietors of the small businesses reported they relied on external companies or asked one of the employees to manage the social media platforms on behalf of a business. The researcher also realized that many of the owners of the small businesses were competent in using social media platforms for customer engagement and advertisement purposes.

One bias to report relates to a personal indifference to social media platforms. The researcher does not use social media platforms for personal or business communication. The researcher did not expect that many of the proprietors of small businesses would be using social media platforms. The researcher was also not adept in using social media platforms. The researcher gained interest in the possibility that social media platforms can be used to enhance customer engagement while performing the literature review for this qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher performed the field exercise with an open mind hoping to learn whether and how the owners of the small businesses used social media platforms. The researcher also wanted to understand whether the owners of the small businesses were comfortable using social media platforms for customer engagement. The data collection exercise, particularly my engagement with the owners of the small businesses, changed my perspective on social media platforms. Where the researcher previously thought the social media platforms were only suitable for personal communication and by the younger generation of people, the researcher now believes they can be used by people of all ages and they are very appropriate for business use.

The researcher was surprised by the knowledge of the owners of small businesses on the use of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The proprietors of

the small businesses talked with passion about the opportunities that social media platforms presented them in the way of enhanced customer engagement and advertisements. The business owners deliberately chose social media platforms to use. They could also explain why they elected not to use certain social media platforms. The researcher also learned that many of the proprietors of the small business used the social media platforms previously before using them for business communication. Therefore, they benefited from prior experiences.

Despite the challenges highlighted earlier, the data collection phase was a valuable learning experience. The researcher is more informed now about the use of social media for both personal and business communication. The researcher has a new appreciation for the concepts in the literature that social media can serve as a platform for customer relationship management now that the researcher has gained first-hand information from the owners of businesses using the platforms. The researcher also appreciates the challenges associated with collecting primary data, especially data of the qualitative nature. The concepts learned during the course work came in handy in findings amicable solutions for the various challenges.

**Summary and Study Conclusions**

Social customer relationship management places small businesses on the path to long-term viability and success by enhancing customer engagement. This qualitative study was designed to explore the influence the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia. The general problem to be addressed in the qualitative study is the lack of awareness of the proprietors of small businesses on social customer relationship management practices. The specific problem to be solved is the lack of awareness by the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management can have for their enterprises.

The qualitative study was performed on 20 proprietors of small businesses drawn from Southern West Virginia. The proprietors of the small businesses from whom the data were collected were drawn from Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, and Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia.

The proprietors of the small businesses showed an awareness that social media can be used effectively as a framework for social customer relationship management. The awareness transcended the knowledge of the applicable social media platforms to include knowledge on how to use them for business communication. The findings showed that resources were a significant factor influencing the decision by the proprietors of small businesses to choose social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Resources highlighted as being significant or money and time. The proprietors of the small businesses chose to adopt social media as a framework for customer relationship management because they could achieve much more with little time and money compared to using traditional marketing communication channels.

The proprietors of the small businesses were positive about the suitability of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. Social media platforms are suitable because they allow small businesses to circumvent their resource limitations while also creating opportunities for enhancing customer engagement. The study showed the use of social customer relationship management helps businesses increase customer engagement and customer loyalty.

Finally, the findings showed social media offered the proprietors of small business improved opportunities to attract and retain their customers.

One of the foundations on which this qualitative study was based was that the failure to use social media platforms was because the proprietors of small businesses were not aware of the potential of social media as a framework for customer relationship management. The findings of this study showed the proprietors of small business in Southern West Virginia were not only aware of the potential of social media as a framework for social customer relationship management, but they also used social media platforms. The findings of this study closed the gap in the literature by demonstrating the influence of resources, both financial and time, in the decisions made by the proprietors of small businesses.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent

Social Customer Relationship Management in Rural Commerce:
A Study of Small Businesses in Southern West Virginia
Timothy John Anderson
Liberty University
School of Business

You are invited to be in a research study on social customer relationship management in rural commerce. You were selected as a possible participant because you are either the proprietor of a small business in Southern West Virginia or are responsible for the social media communication on behalf of the proprietor of the small business in Southern West Virginia. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Timothy John Anderson, a doctoral candidate in the School of Business at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is with the aim of exploring whether the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has for their enterprises.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in an interview consisting of 20 open-ended questions: The estimated time for which you will be engaged is 30 minutes. There will be an audio recording of the entire interview to aid in the collection of the data.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include the opportunity for small businesses who are not using social media for customer relationship management to benefit from the insights gained through this study.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject or the small business for which they are a proprietor. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I will code all the data files and accompanying transcripts alphanumerically. I will give each participant an alphanumeric code. The prefix for the code will be SB. The prefix will be followed by a number between one and twenty depending on the point at which you were interviewed. For instance, the code for the first interviewee will be SB-01. This code will be used in place of your name and the name of the small business that you own or represent. I will require you to mention the assigned code at the beginning of the interview for identification purposes. This coding will ensure that while the researcher is able to locate different data files and transcripts, your identity or that of the business that you own or represent cannot be identified during the analysis phase or at any other time in the three years during which the data will be retained.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Timothy John Anderson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at 304-920-7938 or 1tjanderson@frontier.com. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Steven Cates at scates1@liberty.edu.

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Signature of Participant                                                                    Date

_____
Signature of Investigator                                                                  Date

Appendix B: Permission Request

7th June 2018

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Business Administration degree. The title of my research project is Social Customer Relationship Management in Rural Commerce: A Study of Small Businesses in Southern West Virginia and the purpose of my research is to explore the influence that the use of social customer relationship management has on the small businesses located in Southern West Virginia.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in your small business.

The participants of the study will include the proprietors of the selected small businesses located in any of the four counties in Southern West Virginia. The participants will also include any employees who are tasked with the decision-making in the event that the proprietors of the selected businesses are not involved in its operational management. Only the proprietors of small businesses with less than 100 employees not including the unsalaried family members will be included in the study. In addition, the participants to be considered for inclusion will be above the age of 18 years, own or represent businesses that are registered in any of the four selected counties of Southern West Virginia and use social media as part of their customer relationship management or marketing endeavors.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview. The data will be used to understand whether the proprietors of small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential of social media on their businesses, how the small businesses use social media for customer relationship management and the influence social media has on customer engagement and business performance. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to

Sincerely,

Candidate for Doctor of Business Administration

Appendix C: Recruitment Template

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Business at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Business Administration degree. The purpose of my research is to explore whether the proprietors of the small businesses in Southern West Virginia are aware of the potential that the use of social customer relationship management has for their enterprises, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are the proprietor or an employee tasked with the operational responsibilities of a small business registered with Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber of Commerce, Fayette County Chamber of Commerce, Greater Bluefield Chamber of Commerce, or Princeton-Mercer County Chamber of Commerce, employs less than 100 employees excluding the unsalaried family members, uses social media as part of the customer relationship management practices, are above 18 years of age and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 20-question recorded interview about the use of social media in the context of your business. It should take approximately 30 minutes for you to complete the interview. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

I will contact you to schedule an appropriate and location for the interview.


Sincerely,


Candidate for Doctor of Business Administration

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

1. In what industry does your business operate? Probe for the possibility of businesses that operate in multiple industries.

2. What does social customer relationship management mean in the context of your business?

3. On which social media platforms do you engage with your customers for the purposes of social customer relationship management?

4. What factors influenced your decision to select the social media platforms that you have listed above?

5. What influence, if any, have resources had on the decision to use social media platforms for the purposes of customer relationship management?

6. What is the nature of the formalized marketing plan that you use in your business presently? Probe for all aspects of the formalized marketing plan including the structures and resources allocated to the implementation of the plan.

7. What role does social media play in the achievement of the marketing objectives of your business through the formalized marketing plan?

8. What is the nature of engagement with your customers through the various social media platforms you listed earlier?

9. On what social media platform is the engagement with your customers more significant and why do you think that is the case?

10. How do the communication messages used by your businesses differ from one social media platform to another?

11. Were the decisions to use one social media platform over another more influenced by your familiarity with the application of the social media platform for the purposes of business communication or by the preferences of the customers by the possibility that more of your target customers used one social media platform more than another?

12. What effect, if any, has social customer relationship management had on increasing or decreasing customer loyalty to your business and/or products and services? Ask for as many illustrations of this effect as the respondent can give.

13. What kind of information are you able to gather from and about your customers and the perceptions on your business and/or services by reviewing the posts from your customers or their responses to your posts on the various social media platforms?

14. How do you use the information that you gather from and about your customers and the perceptions on your business and/or services by reviewing the posts from your customers or their responses to your posts on the various social media platforms to enhance your customer targeting practices?

15. What are the competencies of your employees in social customer relationship management?

16. If you have had to improve the capabilities for your business in using social customer relationship management, how have you gone about achieving that?

17. What measurable impact have you noted in the performance of different aspects of our business since you started using social customer relationship management? Probe for impact on customer loyalty, customer engagement, customer satisfaction and sales volume.

18. What are your perceptions on the suitability of the use of social media platforms for the purposes of social customer relationship management?

19. What negative experiences, if any, have you had using social media for the purposes of customer relationship management? Probe for negative publicity, incongruence with formalized marketing plans, ineffectiveness, and lack of knowledge on the use of social media for the purposes of business communication among other negative experiences that emerge during the collection of data.

20. What is your opinion on how social media can be used effectively for the purposes of customer relationship management?

Appendix E: Screening Procedures and Interview Guide

**Screening Procedures**

The prospective participants in the study will be screened to determine their suitability to participate in the study. The screening of the participants will be guided by the inclusion and exclusion criteria. The following are the screening procedures to be employed in selecting the final sample of eligible participants.

a. The screening procedure will be applied to the prospective participants identified from the sampling frame.

b. The screening procedure will be applied to determine the business owners who are eligible for recruitment in the study.

c. The researcher will explain the purpose of the study and the desire to ask some questions to determine whether the prospective proprietor or employee is eligible for participating in the study.

d. The researcher will ask the questions and mark the responses against the appropriate multiple choices in the screening interview guide.

e. The researcher will then determine the eligibility of a participant to participate in the study using the key at the bottom of the screening interview guide.

f. The researcher will inform and explain the outcomes of the screening process to the participants.

**Screening Interview Guide**

The following interview questions will be used to screen the prospective participants for eligibility to participate in this qualitative study:

1. I am above the age of 18 years

a. Yes

b. No

2. I am the proprietor of this business

a. Yes

b. No

3. I am involved in the active running of the operations of the business and decision-making (For proprietors only).

a. Yes

b. No

4. I am responsible for making the decisions of customer relations in the business (For non-proprietors only).

a. Yes

b. No

5. I have the authority to make decisions on behalf of the proprietor of the business (For non-proprietors only).

a. Yes

b. No

6. I have the authority to make decisions on the strategic direction of the company as it relates to customer engagement (For non-proprietors only).

7. I have the authority to make financing decisions on the strategies the small business take with regards to customer engagement.

a. Yes

b. No

8. The business is a member of the chambers of commerce of Mercer, Princeton, Raleigh, or Fayette counties of Southern West Virginia.

a. Yes

b. No

9. Without counting the non-salaried family members, the business has a labor force of less than 100 employees.

a. Yes

b. No

10. My business uses social media as part of its marketing and customer relationship management practices.

a. Yes

a. No

Key

Only the participants who have satisfied all the elements of the inclusion and exclusion criteria eligible for participating in the study. Participants who answer "Yes" to question 2 and "No" to question 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are not eligible to participate in the study. Participants who

answer "No" in question 2 and "Yes" in question 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 are eligible to participate in the study.