

AN EXPLORATION OF RURAL SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS  
EXPERIENCE WITH INTERNET MARKETING

by

Veronica Triplett

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

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### Abstract

This qualitative case study explored how rural small business owners make decisions about using internet marketing as a strategy. To understand the small business owner's experiences, this study uncovered relevant factors influencing the business owner's during the decision-making process. The general problem to be addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by small business owners. The project focused on rural small business owners in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama, to gain their perspective on internet marketing, the impact that a failure to use internet marketing have on their businesses, and the specific factors that influence them not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing. The owners were the primary decision-makers for their business, and the interviews provided the qualitative data used to develop a list of key factors that influence the decision making process in terms of internet marketing. The research methodology permitted a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to the problem and helped identify potential solutions to the problem. The study concludes with recommendations for future research and application to professional practice.

*Key words:* internet marketing, social media, rural small businesses, challenges, qualitative study

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Date: 10/29/2020

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Date: 10-30-2020

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Date: 5 NOV 2020

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my amazing husband, Stanley, who encouraged me every step of the way on this journey. You are my best friend, my inspiration, and my motivation. I can never thank you enough for your unwavering love and support. On the days I wanted to quit and throw in the towel, you were my biggest fan and supporter. You believed in me when I didn't, encouraged me to keep going when I wanted to quit, and reminded me that nothing is too big for our God to see me through. Thank you for everything.

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## **Section 1: Foundation of the Study**

Internet marketing can have a profound effect on rural small businesses in terms of revenue generation and customer traffic. This qualitative study explored the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to adopt internet marketing as a strategy. Understanding factors that influence rural small business owner's adoption of internet marketing helped identify gaps to be addressed that could assist in increasing revenues and customer traffic. In this section, the researcher provides an overview of the general and specific business problems to be explored and the method used to explore the problem. This section will also include information about the research questions, conceptual framework, definitions of terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, implications for biblical integration, and the significance of the study. The researcher will also provide a review of the professional literature directly related to the problem to justify the study's purpose.

### **Background of the Problem**

Internet marketing is a multifaceted strategy that creates new channels for businesses to market their products and services but often poses a challenge for small businesses (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Small business owners often face difficulties with marketing activities in general, but even more so with internet marketing, which can lead to low earning potential and low visibility (Fiore et al., 2013). According to Osiri (2013), most small business owners tend to struggle to design and implement successful internet marketing strategies due to several key factors such as internet marketing knowledge, geographic location, age, time, and access to broadband for the business owner and their customers. Small business owners must understand the importance of internet marketing so their marketing strategies align with how consumers are purchasing products and services. This is supported by the more than 2.41 billion people who use

the internet, representing approximately 34.3% of the world population (Al-Debei et al., 2014). Another crucial detail is small business owners should also understand roughly \$370 billion is spent annually in the U.S. on online retail (Mosteller et al., 2014).

Small business owners who do not use internet marketing fail to put their products and services in a channel where a large portion of consumers are making purchases (Isoraite, 2017). In the U.S., small businesses are the catalyst for growing local economies through job creation, which makes their survival crucial in small towns (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). The lack of internet marketing used by small business owners may inhibit them from attracting enough customers to ensure their businesses remain viable. In a recent study, Lewis and Reiley (2014) found implementing internet-based technology, such as websites for online advertising, can increase sales for businesses online and brick and mortar stores. Although the importance of using internet-based technology as a marketing tool has been highlighted, many small businesses are still not using internet marketing (Richmond et al., 2017). Understanding why rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing can help businesses survive who do not succeed due to a lack of visibility and low revenue generation.

### **Problem Statement**

The general problem to be addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by small business owners. Small business owners who fail to use internet marketing as a strategy may lose customer traffic, visibility, and revenues, which are essential for sustainability. Alford and Page (2015) stated that despite the importance, significance, and substantial benefits of internet marketing, most small and medium-sized businesses who adopt internet-based technologies for marketing are limited. Jones et al. (2015) stated the use of internet technologies to market products and services for small businesses is critically important due to the lack of resources

these small businesses have to market in the traditional ways, which cause small businesses to have a lack of visibility and customer traffic. Chao et al. (2012) supported these views by explaining using internet-based marketing tools can help businesses market to consumers in a more cost-effective manner and provide consumers with additional product information promptly. Richmond et al. (2017) found rural small businesses, even those who have access to broadband, are not using internet-based technology to market their businesses through websites, e-commerce, or social media. The specific problem to be addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners within the southeastern United States, resulting in a loss of customer traffic and revenues.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how rural small business owners make decisions related to using internet marketing as a marketing strategy. This study uncovered relevant factors that influence the business owner's decision-making process to understand the business owner's experiences. Mohan and Ali (2019) stated there are many challenges small businesses face when adopting internet marketing. Therefore, future qualitative studies are recommended to explore these challenges in a different context to determine what challenges are unique to small businesses and what challenges are universal. This study addressed a gap in the literature related to factors that influence rural small business owners' lack of internet marketing adoption. Addressing this gap can help rural small business owners identify the barriers related to their marketing strategy and create a plan to overcome these barriers. This study will also serve as a potential resource for future qualitative studies on the decision-making process for rural small business owners' internet marketing strategies. This larger problem is explored

through an in-depth study of the lack of internet marketing strategies used by small rural businesses within the southeastern United States and how the businesses are affected.

### **Nature of the Study**

A qualitative methodology and case study design were used in this study to explore the factors that influence small business owner's failure to use internet marketing as a strategy. The quantitative and mixed research methods are alternatives to the chosen method. The following discussion on research methods will demonstrate why the qualitative method is the best fit for the study. The phenomenological, ethnographic, narrative, and grounded theory research designs are alternatives to the chosen design. The following discussion on research designs will demonstrate why the chosen design is the best fit for this study.

### ***Discussion of Method***

The qualitative research method was selected because it allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information from participants. Creswell and Poth (2017) stated that qualitative research is best used when the researcher needs to explore a problem or issue. Barnham (2015) stated qualitative research methodology is most appropriate when a researcher is looking to explore social or human problems. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore factors that influence the small business owner's failure to use internet marketing as a strategy, and in-depth data collection is needed, which fits the qualitative methodology. The qualitative research method was selected over other methods because it seeks to discover descriptions and interpretations of issues related to a specific situation (Stake, 2010).

The quantitative research method was an alternative to the chosen method. Still, it was not chosen because it would not allow the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the problem. The quantitative method's nature is to explore relationships between variables by using

numerical expressions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The problem to be solved, exploring the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners, does not include numerical measures on which a relationship between variables can be determined. An in-depth exploration of factors is required to explore the general and specific problem posed in this study, which the quantitative method cannot help produce. The information needed can only be collected by interviewing multiple rural small business owners to gain their diverse perspectives, which using the quantitative methodology would not achieve.

The mixed-method research method was another alternative method but was not chosen because the aim of this study is not to explore the relationship between variables, along with gathering in-depth information to explain the complex issue. The nature of mixed research is to blend qualitative and quantitative methods to gain multiple viewpoints and perspectives to answer research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018), the mixed methods approach would allow the researcher to collect data in depth and breadth as well as allow for triangulation. One limitation of this method and the reason it was not chosen is because of the limitations placed on the depth of data collection from the quantitative method. However, this limitation can be balanced with the qualitative data collected. The mixed research methodology is also very complex, costly, and time-intensive, which can lead to discrepancies in the data and how it is interpreted (Clark, 2017).

### ***Discussion of Design***

The case study research design was selected for this study over alternative qualitative designs. This research design is appropriate for this study because it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence rural small business owners' failure to use internet marketing. After considering alternative designs such as phenomenology, ethnography, narrative,

and grounded theory, the case study design was selected. The case study design focuses on the *how* and *why* of a case or cases (Ridder, 2017). Researchers who use the case study design study an individual or multiple cases within the confines of a real-life setting (Campbell, 2015), and the goal is to provide an in-depth understanding of the case. Researchers look at each case and provide descriptions, issues, themes, or situations from which to analyze (Campbell, 2015). The case study design will allow the researcher to ask what and how questions and explore the issue much deeper than other designs would allow.

The phenomenology research design involves studying the essence of lived experiences in the world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological research design is also aimed at discovering the essence of people who have a shared significant event (Creswell et al., 2007). This method is not appropriate because the researcher is looking to gain an understanding about experiences, meanings, and perspectives from the rural small business owner's viewpoints and not to explore a shared significant event (Hammarberg et al., 2016).

The ethnography design does not align with the purpose of this study as the purpose of this design is to understand how culture sharing groups work (Walford, 2018). This study aimed to answer the *what* and *how* of the experience of rural small business owners. Researchers who choose to use this design are interested in studying the shared patterns, such as values, behavior, and beliefs, among the culture-sharing group (Walford, 2018). Descriptions, which are complex and complete in nature, are developed for the group and any subgroups (Walford, 2018). Adequate time for data collection, understanding and balancing cultural sensitivities, and an understanding of cultural anthropology could all be challenges in using this design for this study and is why it was not selected (Hallett & Barber, 2014).

The narrative design does not align with this study as the purpose is to focus on written or oral accounts of stories about the lives of a single or small group of individuals from their perspective (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Schimmel (2016), narrative inquiry not only consists of the stories told from an individual's perspectives but also involves collecting data methods such as interviews, observations, pictures, letters, and journal records, among other pieces of data. Researchers often choose the narrative design when a narrow focus is being used to conduct research, and the researcher is interested in a single story that through research, reveals a complete picture of a lived experience (Carless & Douglas, 2017). While the narrative design may seem simple, it does have a set of unique challenges. This design was not chosen because the researcher will need to collect data from several rural small businesses to have enough information to explain the issue.

The grounded theory design also does not align with the study because the researcher is not developing a new theory and the purpose of narrative design is to move beyond descriptions and focus on the discovery of theory (Goulding, 2017). The goal of this design is to develop a theory of something or how something works, and researchers generally use a technique called memoing, recording of ideas through collection and analysis, to assist them in the theory development (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The grounded theory design is used by researchers when a theory needed to explain or understand a process is not available (Hicks, 2018) and is the reason this design was not chosen.

### ***Summary of the Nature of the Study.***

The purpose of this research was to understand the factors that influence small business owner's failure to use internet marketing as a strategy. The qualitative methodology was the best fit for this study over the quantitative method because it will allow the researcher to gain an in-

depth understanding of the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to adopt internet marketing as a strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The case study research design was selected over other qualitative designs such as phenomenology, narrative, ethnography, and grounded theory because this design will allow the researcher to capture the essence of the factors that influence small business owner's failure to use internet marketing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the qualitative research method using a case study design was selected for this study.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided the study.

RQ1. Why do rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing to market their products and services?

RQ1a. To what extent do rural small business owners understand how their failure to use internet marketing affects their business?

RQ1b. To what extent do key factors influence rural small business owner's decision-making process in implementing internet marketing strategies?

These research questions were designed to help answer the overarching question and fulfill the purpose of this qualitative study. The primary research question sought to reveal the essence of the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners. The secondary research questions sought to illustrate the breadth of awareness business owners have regarding the impacts of internet marketing on their business. The secondary research questions also sought to uncover the specific factors that influence the business owner's non-use of internet marketing to provide an understanding of the business owner's experiences.

## **Conceptual Framework**

The two theories that guided this qualitative study are the technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm theory. The technology acceptance model serves as a key model in understanding predictors of human behavior toward accepting or rejecting technology (Marangunic & Granic, 2015). The resource-based view of the firm is a strategic management theory that helps firms assess their resources to determine how it impacts their financial performance to achieve a competitive advantage (Alexy et al., 2018). By using the technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm theory, these theories can help the researcher formulate interview questions, determine appropriate data collection and analysis techniques, and provide theories that support how rural small business owners make decisions and how resources impact those decisions.

### ***Technology Acceptance Model***

The technology acceptance model (TAM) stems from the psychological theory of reasoned action and theory of planned behavior (Davis, 1989). This model serves as a key model in understanding predictors of behavior toward the acceptance or rejection of technology based on perceived usefulness, ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology (Davis, 1989). The underlying assumption of TAM is that the fundamental relationship between belief, attitude, intention, and behavior helps to explain and predict the acceptance of technology among individuals (Mortenson & Vidgen, 2016). TAM focuses on two primary beliefs about technology, perceived usefulness and ease of use (Marangunic & Granic, 2015). Both of these beliefs determine attitudes about technology, which leads directly to a person's intent to use the technology (Marangunic & Granic, 2015).

Researchers, including Hsiao and Yang (2011), Rauniar et al. (2014), and Baby and Kannammal (2019), among others, have used TAM and have further developed the model. Several studies have been conducted using the TAM model to understand the adoption or lack of technology adoption by individuals. Omar et al. (2011) conducted a study using the TAM model to explain the factors that influenced the adoption of internet marketing by small and medium-sized businesses in Malaysia. Pentina et al. (2012) also used the TAM model to explore small and medium-sized businesses and their adoption with social networking tools to market their businesses.

When considering the technology acceptance model in terms of factors that influence rural small business owners' failure to use internet marketing, TAM helps predict business owners' intentions to adopt internet marketing as a strategy based on the perceived usefulness and ease of use. The TAM model fits well with this study's purpose, which is to determine the factors that influence rural small business owners' actions toward the adoption of internet technology. This model can also help guide the work that is needed to address the research questions of this study. The TAM model will help the researcher understand why small rural business owners fail to use internet marketing, the extent to which the business owners understand how not using this technology affects their business, and what key factors influence the business owner's experience in implementing the internet marketing strategies.

### ***Resource-Based View of the Firm***

The resource based-view of the firm helps firms assess successes and failures based on the resources and capabilities within the firm (Alexy et al., 2018). The resource-based view of the firm is also useful in helping to understand in more depth how resources can be strategically combined to give the firm a competitive advantage in their industry (Barney, 1991; Wemerlet,

1984). This model serves as a key model in understanding the firm's internal capabilities related to its portfolio of resources (Alonso & Bressan, 2016). The two fundamental assumptions that the resource-based view relies on are that firms within an industry have their unique resources and firm resources are hard to get in the marketplace due to a number of factors (Kull et al., 2016).

Researchers including Halabi and Lussier (2014), Davcik and Sharma (2016), and Kull et al. (2016), among others, have used the resource-based view in studies and has further developed the framework. Several studies have been conducted using the resource-based view model to understand the factors that influence the adoption or lack of technology adoption by business owners. Ramanathan et al. (2012) conducted a study using the resource-based view model to explore the implementation of e-commerce in small to medium-sized businesses and their marketing performance and operations. Alonso and Bressan (2016) also used the resource-based view of the firm to explore the important marketing resources needed in wine firms in Italy.

When considering the resource-based view in terms of factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to use internet marketing, the resource-based view helps determine if the business may be more successful using internet marketing as a strategy based on the internal resources of the firm. The resource-based view fits well with the purpose of this study, which is to determine the factors, which include knowledge, skills, and abilities that influence rural small business owner's actions toward the adoption of internet technology. This model can also help the researcher develop interview questions and guide the work needed to address the research questions of this study. The resource-based view of the firm model will help the researcher understand how the internal resources of the small rural business owner influence the owner's adoption of internet marketing. This model will also help the researcher identify additional key

factors influencing the business owner's experience in implementing internet marketing strategies.

### ***Discussion of Relationships Between Concepts***

The TAM and resource-based view of the firm have several similar characteristics, which facilitates the integration of the two concepts on which to base this study. Primarily, the organization's overall success is at the center of both frameworks (Omar et al., 2011; Ramanathan et al., 2012). In addition, both concepts require organizations to look internally to evaluate resources and decision making based on multiple factors.

### ***Summary of the Conceptual Framework***

The technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm guided this study as rural small business owners need both capabilities and resources to implement internet marketing as a strategy (Kull et al., 2016). Capabilities for the small business owners can include owners and employees' skills and experiences, current internet technology infrastructure, and knowledge of internet marketing strategies (Davicik & Sharma, 2016). Resources for the small business owners can include the internet, access to broadband, computers or similar electronic devices, and access to appropriate email marketing and social media platforms (Davicik & Sharma, 2016).

### **Definition of Terms**

*Internet marketing*: the use of the internet and related technology for the purpose of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and can include websites, search engine marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, and mobile marketing. Digital marketing, electronic marketing, e-marketing, and internet marketing are all similar terms which refer to marketing online through various channels (Grubor & Jaksa, 2018).

*Rural business:* businesses that are established and operate in rural settings with a population of less than 50,000 and the surrounding suburbs outside of metropolitan areas (Bosworth & Turner, 2018).

*Small business:* businesses that operate for-profit with fewer than 500 employees (SBA, 2016). In this study, small business will refer to businesses who operate with a maximum of 15 employees.

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

#### ***Assumptions***

The researcher's first assumption is participants in the study will provide insightful, honest, and complete feedback during the interviews. The researcher used open-ended interview questions to allow the interviewee to respond to their comfort level, which should help alleviate concerns for the interviewee. The second assumption is the business owners interviewed have not currently adopted or fully adopted internet marketing as a marketing strategy. The researcher screened each business prior to the invitation to participate to ensure that this criterion was met.

#### ***Limitations***

The limitations known in this study included the types and locations of small businesses selected to be interviewed. The rural small businesses were located in either Sumter or Marengo counties in Alabama and operated primarily in the consumer retail, real estate, or service industry. Rural small businesses in other industries will not be represented in this study. Due to the locations and industries of the small businesses selected, results may not be generalizable.

#### ***Delimitations***

The delimitations known in this study included the scope of the study and the knowledge level of participants selected. The scope of this study was limited to rural small businesses with

no more than 15 employees. Rural small business owners' knowledge of internet marketing varied across the participants as most do not use internet marketing to market their products or services.

### **Significance of the Study**

This qualitative study explored the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to adopt internet marketing as a marketing strategy that impacts customer traffic and revenues (Jones et al., 2015). The information obtained from this study could help rural small businesses overcome barriers that prevent them from adopting internet marketing strategies. This study provided information directly related to rural small business owner's experiences with internet marketing and factors that influence their adoption of internet marketing as a strategy.

### ***Reduction of Gaps***

The peer-reviewed scholarly academic literature available in this area revealed a gap in the research related explicitly to rural small businesses this study will allow the researcher to add knowledge. Richmond et al. (2017) recommended future studies explore what would drive small business owners in rural areas to adopt internet marketing practices. These authors also suggested exploring the combination of factors that impact the implementation of this strategy with the focus on the ability of small business owners to create more visibility and generate additional revenues (Richmond et al., 2017). Mohan and Ali (2019) stated there are many challenges small businesses face when adopting internet marketing. Therefore, future qualitative studies are recommended to explore these challenges in a different context to determine what challenges are unique to small businesses and what challenges are universal. Despite the challenges, the adoption of internet marketing is essential for small businesses because of the competitive advantages internet marketing can afford the businesses (Shaltoni et al., 2018). The

addition of this study will add to the available literature and help rural small business owners make better decisions regarding their internet marketing strategy. Gaining an in-depth understanding of the gaps in the factors that influence rural small business owners' lack of internet marketing adoption can help rural small business owners identify the barriers related to their business and create a plan to overcome these barriers.

### ***Implications for Biblical Integration***

Sound decision making and proper allocation of resources to advance a rural small business through strategic marketing decisions using a biblical worldview can help business owners achieve their goals and objectives using God's purpose for business as a guide. Viewing the world from God's perspective on business and profit can help guide business owners in their thinking and decision making (Rhodes & Pullen, 2018). Executing sound business strategies through good decision making can also help small businesses minimize cost and maximize profits, but should be done so in a manner that is fair to all key stakeholders (Stroh, 2015). According to Van Duzer (2010), God's purpose for business is to operate a business in a manner that goods and services can be provided to help communities flourish and provide opportunities for others to engage in meaningful work.

The technology acceptance theory and the concept of making sound business decisions are directly related to this study of internet marketing adoption for rural small businesses. Making sound business decisions is key to helping small businesses succeed, and scriptures help to inform this. Proverbs 18:13 says, "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (NIV). Also, Proverbs 18:17 says, "the first to present his case seems right, til another comes forward and questions him." These Bible verses provide insight into how business owners should seek clarity and knowledge when making decisions that affect the outcome of their

businesses. Business owners should seek information that helps them make informed decisions about technology acceptance instead of making decisions based on fear, lack of knowledge, or a lack of understanding. Business owners should also make sure they fully understand what it takes to adopt internet marketing as a strategy and not lean on others' understanding. If business owners start and continue to market their business through traditional marketing mediums and not consider internet marketing, they may think this is their best approach until someone questions why they are not using other more visible and cost-effective strategies.

In the same regard, the resource-based view of the firm and the concept of making sound business decisions are directly related to this study as well. Strategically allocating resources for the business can also help a small business realize success by minimizing cost and maximizing profits (Maritan & Lee, 2017). To make the best decisions for an organization and move the organization forward, organizations should choose specific strategies to help allocate financial resources (Maritan & Lee, 2017). In the case of this study, rural small business owners should seek cost-effective marketing strategies so that they can allocate already scarce resources to other needed areas of operation. As said in the scripture 2 Corinthians 9:10, “for God is the one who provides seed for the farmer then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.” Small businesses often have limited resources to market their products or services. If resources, whether physical, human, or financial, are allocated appropriately, small businesses may realize business success.

### ***Relationship to Field of Study***

This qualitative study is significant to the related field of marketing because it will add to the body of marketing knowledge. The study of rural small businesses and their failure to adopt internet marketing is directly related to the field of marketing because internet marketing is

marketing. Internet marketing is an advertising channel that provides businesses with the ability to reach specific audiences and a way to measure the number of customers who view their products or services (Isoraite, 2017). Internet marketing and modern technology have transformed how consumers interact, behave, communicate, and make purchases from businesses (Grubor & Jaksa, 2018). Through internet marketing, small businesses can engage with customers and tailor marketing messages specific to the needs of their customers or potential customers (Grubor & Jaksa, 2018), which can help improve customer traffic and revenues. Rural small businesses need to know what internet marketing strategies can help them build customer traffic and revenues with repeat visitors. This qualitative study is also significant to the field of marketing because it involves the exploration of several marketing concepts, including internet marketing, social media marketing, business exposure, revenue generation from marketing, and factors that influence marketing decisions. According to Shaltoni (2017), the adoption of internet marketing by small businesses vary to those who use state-of-the-art websites and multiple social media platforms to those who use none at all. According to Mohan and Ali (2019), the concept of internet marketing in small businesses is it is an emerging tool for customer-focused marketing to maintain and grow relationships with customers. The knowledge from this study will help benefit the field of marketing.

### ***Summary of the Significance of the Study***

Small businesses are known for growing local economies through job creation, making their survival crucial in small towns (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). The lack of internet marketing used by small business owners may inhibit them from attracting enough customers to ensure their businesses remain viable. Therefore, additional research in the area of factors that influence rural small business owners' adoption of internet marketing is significant in the field of

marketing. Rural small business owners tend to find it challenging to design and implement successful internet marketing strategies due to several factors (Osiri, 2013). There is significance to be found in exploring and understanding the factors that influence business owner's decisions regarding internet marketing. Understanding this complex issue is essential because it allows business owners who are living the experience to respond differently to implementing internet marketing strategies. The findings of this qualitative study may also inspire others to conduct research on the reasons rural small business owners make decisions to adopt or fail to adopt internet marketing as a strategy.

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

The general problem addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by small business owners within the southeastern United States, which could result in a loss of customer traffic, visibility, and revenues, which are essential for sustainability. The internet has revolutionized how businesses operate, communicate, and engage with various stakeholders. As a business tool, internet service enables both small and large businesses to realize strategic goals, enhance operational efficiency, improve competitiveness, and attain a broader market reach. The primary focus of this study is to add to the body of knowledge by exploring this problem through an in-depth study on the lack of internet marketing strategies used by small rural businesses and the factors that influence these decisions. This literature review includes an overview of internet marketing in general and how internet marketing is used as a marketing strategy, including benefits, customer engagement, business exposure, and revenue generation. Various internet marketing tools, including websites and social networking platforms, are also explored that help business owners increase visibility and revenues.

This literature review also includes the examination of rural small business characteristics and the challenges these businesses face in marketing. In reviewing the challenges, an outline of the successes and failures in rural business marketing will be explored. The literature will also discuss the factors which include knowledge, skills, abilities, as well as financial, human, and physical resources, that influence rural small business owners' adoption of internet marketing. The literature reviewed for this study includes literature directly related to the purpose of this study and aligns with the research questions and conceptual frameworks presented in the foundation of the study. This literature review will provide a foundation of previous scholarly work in the area of small businesses and their marketing strategies by which to compare business practices against this qualitative study.

According to Icha and Agwu (2015), "the internet is independently the fastest way to gain customer attention and at a wide reach, the way an organization can connect with their customers through social media" (p. 8). Like other essential utilities, internet access and use are critical to the growth and sustainability of a business in an ever-growing and highly digitalized global market. Although Information and Communication Technology (ICT) connectivity is widespread across many industries, the rate of adoption of ICT infrastructure and strategies is slower among small businesses as compared to larger businesses. The problem is even worse in rural areas where digital inequalities persist due to unique social, economic, and territorial factors (Philip & Williams, 2019). Also, rural small businesses fail to adopt ICT due to perceived lack of applicability and potential to generate returns. These opinions align with the technology acceptance model's primary assumption, which holds that users' acceptance and use of technology depends on the perceived usefulness and ease of use (Surendran, 2012). With these

factors in play, rural small businesses lack incentives to change their marketing strategies to include more technology.

From a resource-based view of the firm perspective, ICT exposes rural business owners to a broad range of business opportunities, which is why they should adopt technology, particularly in marketing. Primarily, the use of internet-based marketing tools helps businesses lower the cost of marketing and afford business owners to provide product information to customers promptly (Chao et al., 2012). Additionally, Jones et al. (2015) asserted that internet marketing promotes intensive use of available resources, enhance brand visibility, and increase customer traffic, unlike conventional marketing models. Despite these benefits, Richmond et al. (2017) determined most rural small businesses fail to use internet-based technology to market their products even when they have access to broadband. This finding underlines the need to examine why rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing, associated consequences, and factors influencing their experiences in implementing internet marketing strategies.

### **What is Internet Marketing?**

From a broad perspective, marketing generally refers to all managerial processes aimed at identifying, anticipating, and satisfying consumers' needs in the most cost-effective manner (Payne et al., 2017). Today, marketing is considered to be a philosophy that guides organizational activities and the strategic focus of a firm (Kennedy, 2017). Similarly, it is considered to be a range of specialized functions that govern issues related to public relations, customer service, market research, and product management (Taiminen & Karjaluo, 2015). In an increasingly competitive marketplace, businesses are likely to be disadvantaged relative to the external environment if they do not have timely access to current information about the

customers, the competitors, and the industry in general. The concept of internet marketing emerged as a bridge to the shortcomings of conventional marketing strategies and tools that prolonged the problem of lack of information (Yousaf et al., 2018).

Internet marketing is defined in a variety of ways by different researchers. Eida and El-Gohary (2013) defined internet marketing as marketing and advertising efforts that use web technologies and email to drive sales of products through electronic commerce. Jarvinen et al. (2012) defined internet marketing as the use of the internet for creating and delivering value to customers, which results in a mutually satisfying exchange. Similarly, Grubor and Jaksa (2018) defined internet marketing as the use of the internet and related technology for the purpose of creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and can include websites, search engine marketing, social media marketing, content marketing, email marketing, and mobile marketing. Digital marketing, electronic marketing, e-marketing, and internet marketing are all similar terms that refer to marketing online through various channels (Grubor & Jaksa, 2018). As a strategic marketing management tool, Schwarzl and Grabowska (2015) defined internet marketing as a target-oriented use of internet tools to deliver promotional marketing messages to a particular niche of customers. The commonalities found among these definitions include the use of the internet and related technology to market products and services to consumers through multiple online channels.

The definition posited by Schwarzl and Grabowska (2015) implied internet/online marketing is simply the use of interactive virtual or digital spaces to promote the sale of goods and services. Internet marketing is designed to satisfy the following three critical functions. First, it facilitates marketing research, which is necessary for identifying customer needs and wants. Secondly, it assists the firm to anticipate purchasing patterns and consumer behaviour by

observing digital platforms traffic, specific customer information, and type of purchases made. This role helps a business to design appropriate marketing messaging that will translate to sales. Lastly, it helps satisfy the needs of the customers through relationship management. This outcome can be achieved through a feedback loop where a business engages directly with the customers (Kuofie et al., 2015). In the marketing environment, these roles make internet marketing a valuable tool for all companies.

### **Internet Marketing as a Marketing Strategy**

Many researchers acknowledge that numerous factors qualify internet marketing as a marketing strategy for both small and large businesses. The first factor relates to the consumer behavior strategy in which research shows that the internet has changed how people find and use information (Jones et al., 2015; López García et al., 2019). The rate of change is directly proportional to internet adoption rates as well as advances in technology. According to Jung et al. (2013), the increase in the intensity of use of the internet among consumers presents marketers with the opportunity to reach and connect with prospective clients through digital communication platforms, such as social media and a companies' websites. Zickuhr and Smith (2012) stated nearly 92% of consumers rely on the internet to obtain information about goods and services. This point is important for analysis because it shows the spread of online shoppers in the marketplace. The need to adopt internet marketing among businesses is informed because consumers rely on technology to network, develop relationships, and deepen interactions (Yousaf et al., 2018). For this reason, small, medium, and large companies should adopt online marketing as a marketing strategy to offer potential customers the opportunity to engage and interact with their marketing content (El-Gohary, 2012).

The implication of the product and brand strategy factor in marketing strategy depends on the size of the firm. For big businesses, online marketing serves as a cost-cutting strategy and a form of mass customization of marketing content (Yannopoulos, 2011). As a cost-saving strategy, internet-based marketing reduces the marginal cost of distribution of both digital and non-digital products. By aggregating, marketing, and selling goods online, businesses cut costs related to traditional distribution media. Besides, internet-based technologies help marketers customize goods and services whereby consumers have a choice of a combination of products to purchase. For example, businesses can use search engine optimization to increase site visits, and, at the same time, utilize recommendation systems to suggest other alternatives for the consumer depending on their preferences, as evidenced by keywords supplied (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). This strategy is mainly applicable to big businesses that can leverage economies of scale and guarantee online consumers' security and privacy. These factors guarantee large companies a huge advantage in the marketplace in the sense small enterprises lack economies of scale and resources to capitalize on this aspect of internet marketing (Johnson et al., 2019). The reality of this is small businesses, particularly those in the rural areas, deal with unbundled products. These rural small businesses also lack the capital to create secure sites that guarantee security for consumer information. In general, consumers are usually skeptical of doing business online due to trust and privacy issues. These issues collectively help explain why small businesses are disadvantaged in terms of online-based branding relative to large companies in this strategy. Also, these factors may explain why small business owners are reluctant to adopt internet marketing despite its distinct advantages. Overall, internet marketing provides businesses with opportunities for positioning and branding they would not have otherwise.

Internet marketing also provides businesses with new ways of conveying promotional messages through promotional strategies. The internet entails a critical component of an integrated marketing communication plan whereby it serves as a medium of transmission of information (Payne et al., 2017). Online marketing serves as a promotional strategy on two levels. First, it acts as an electronic trade show in which businesses exhibit product and service offerings. On the part of the consumers, the internet serves as an exhibition hall, which is accessible 24/7 (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). Secondly, internet marketing is designed to act as a community flea market (Yannopoulos, 2011). This analogy is attributed to the open, informal, and interactive attributes of internet marketing. Therefore, businesses should embrace the concept of internet marketing and use readily available internet marketing tools, such as social media and company websites, to develop their promotional strategies. For example, a website incorporates two attributes of marketing, which include direct selling and advertising. Therefore, the optimal use of a company website can help a business generate awareness, demonstrate product attributes, and supply product information to the consumers. These types of sites can be used as a feedback system through which a business communicates and engages with the customers (Öztamur & Karakadılar, 2014). This potential is accessible to all types of companies across businesses and geographic locations. As such, internet marketing as a promotional strategy is good for rural small businesses.

Internet marketing also plays an important role in distribution strategies. Distribution strategies can be viewed from two perspectives, which are the interactions among members of the channel and the distribution of products across multiple channels and their effectiveness (Sharma et al., 2019). Internet marketing features attributes of a conventional retail store as well as a medium of delivery. In marketing, the internet can be viewed as electronic channels through

which businesses can reach end-product or service users (Yannopoulos, 2011). The properties that make internet marketing a critical component of a firm's marketing strategy include its convenience, cost-effectiveness, timeliness, and integrative features (Mahar et al., 2014). Internet marketing allows consumers to search and compare products and prices at their convenience. Also, it grants customers the freedom to order goods and services without visiting the stores physically; therefore, it reduces transaction, search costs, and time (Jeanpert & Pache, 2016). Most importantly, the internet facilitates the integration of electronic data interchange systems, which makes ordering and processing of customer requests faster (Johnson et al., 2019). These properties simplify logistics requirements for businesses; therefore, making service delivery more efficient.

Internet marketing also has significant implications for pricing, which is shown in several ways. First, increased access to information creates a competitive environment in which businesses compete based on their pricing strategy (Decker & Stummer, 2017). The role of internet marketing on this front is first the internet allows the consumer to access a significant amount of information, which facilitates the search and comparison of products and prices. Secondly, entities that employ online marketing incur fewer advertisement costs, which can be translated into lower product pricing (Van Scheers, 2018). A second implication of internet marketing on pricing relates to the feature of interactive shopping of the internet. The internet serves as a gateway to information and lowers search and transaction costs considerably (Zheng & Guo, 2016). Therefore, by employing the services of various interactive shopping agents and platforms, businesses make their product information available to a large number of online shoppers at a single click of a button (El-Ouardighi et al., 2016). In this digital era, the number of online shoppers has skyrocketed with a corresponding increase in online suppliers (Jeanpert &

Pache, 2016). In this case, online suppliers' growth implies that shoppers have access to a wide variety of products and services, with the cost of product switching being zero (Yannopoulos, 2011). This reality enhances the bargaining power of buyers relative to businesses. Thus, for small business owners to survive this pressure, they should adopt internet marketing and compete through competitive pricing strategies in the online world.

### **Benefits of Internet Marketing for Small Businesses**

Internet marketing encompasses all elements of a marketing mix. The marketing strategies analysis previously discussed involves the aspect of people as evidenced increased share of online shoppers. Also, it features characters of product, promotion, place, and price, as demonstrated in the analysis of product and branding strategy, promotional strategy, distributional strategy, and pricing strategy, respectively (Jain, 2013). In this regard, internet marketing has numerous benefits to a business. Broadly, the most apparent benefits of internet marketing for small businesses include greater customer engagement, exposure, and significant revenue generation.

### ***Customer Engagement***

Many studies agree that internet marketing technologies are fundamental in strengthening the business-customer relationship. A study by Eid and El-Kassrawy (2012) showed a business can leverage the internet to create an integrated communication plan which helps with customer engagement. It can achieve this objective by synchronizing existing communication platforms or channels to improve customer relations. These sentiments are shared by Durkin (2013) who also stated a synchronized communication network is essential in identifying the aspirations of the customers, an act critical in improving targeting activities. These findings demonstrate how a business can use internet marketing to enhance customer engagement. Specifically, Harrigan et

al. (2011) and Christiansen (2011) stated marketers can use interactive communication technologies to access customers' data to personalize and deliver targeted messaging. On this front, the use of online marketing tools helps businesses understand the interests and characteristics of their customers to develop a communication plan that seeks to foster the business-customer relationship.

From the customers' perspective, internet marketing provides customers with timely information about various elements of the marketing mix. This accessibility allows them to search, interrogate, and compare products and prices, and, at the same time, engage with the sellers (Bostanshirin, 2014). Essentially, websites and social media sites, which are the channels of internet marketing, allow businesses and consumers to network and develop meaningful relationships (Bostanshirin, 2014). Unlike conventional media, internet marketing provides an interactive space that facilitates two-way communication (Yau & Tang, 2018). It not only provides customers with information but also allows them to engage and interact with the content.

For small businesses, improved customer engagement presents an opportunity for growth in the sense it facilitates the customization of goods and services according to the interests and preferences of the consumers (Bell & Loane, 2011; Fan & Tsai, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). Greater customer engagement has an empowering effect in the sense it broadens the market reach of small businesses. Customer engagement also allows small businesses to promote and brand their products without necessarily incurring substantial advertising expenses. Therefore, deepened customer relationship offers small businesses the capacity to survive and compete at the market level with established enterprises.

### *Exposure*

In terms of exposure, internet marketing leads in terms of flexibility, interactivity, and instant feedback relative to conventional methods (Decker & Stummer, 2017). It is also flexible in the sense of personalization and customization of marketing messages. These advantages are realized as a result of improved operational and marketing efficiency associated with digital marketing (Bostanshirin, 2014). Many researchers agree internet marketing is affordable relative to other channels, a factor that makes less-established businesses visible in the marketplace. Since businesses do not have to incur substantial advertisement costs to promote their products through internet marketing, small business owners can readily collaborate, share, and broaden their share of business opportunities by capitalizing on web technologies (Bell & Loane, 2011; Fan & Tsai, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). With these tools at hand, small businesses can expand, improve operational efficiency, and scale up operations to attain rapid growth. In essence, internet marketing provides small businesses with a platform through which they can compete with big companies cost-effectively.

On a different front, research shows online marketing has a broader market reach, and it is limitless in terms of time, space, and location. With these features, Fan and Tsai (2014) and Bell and Loane (2011) believed online marketing is a gateway for small businesses to reach the global market. Here, internet marketing tools, such as websites, emails, and blogs, offer marketers access to different market niches that open opportunities for business growth both locally and internationally. Apăvăloaie (2014) suggested these capabilities are complemented because consumers can access firms' social media pages and websites 24/7 from anywhere across the world. In this way, internet marketing eliminates geographic barriers and allows small businesses to present their product and service offerings to different groups of consumers.

### ***Revenue Generation***

According to Demishkevich (2015), internet marketing promotes revenue generation on multiple fronts. In a broad sense, internet marketing contributes to revenue generation through cost-cutting, increased customer traffic, and brand visibility. Compared to traditional marketing channels, internet marketing is cost-effective, implying it can accomplish advertising objectives at a fraction of the cost (Demishkevich, 2015). Besides, the cost of establishing an online presence is considerably low, a factor that helps a business save due to reduced marketing expenses. Online marketing also promotes operational efficiency, which lowers the cost of daily operations (Porto et al., 2017).

In regards to revenue generation and customer traffic, online marketing effectively expands brand awareness, which, in turn, attracts a loyal customer base that maintains and grows sales (Porto et al., 2017). Brand building inspires loyalty as customers develop individual perceptions about the products of a given company. This outcome is achievable through targeted marketing communication and greater customer engagement (López García et al., 2019). Greater brand visibility is accompanied by high conversion rates of potential customers to actual buyers (López García et al., 2019). Most importantly, online marketing opens new market fronts for a business adding to existing revenues. Overall, small businesses should adopt online marketing by leveraging various internet marketing tools, such as a company's websites and social media networking reap from the associated benefits highlighted above.

### **Internet Marketing Tools**

Small business owners should not only adopt internet marketing tools to reap the many benefits they provide, but the owners should also ensure they are using these tools effectively. As previously mentioned, these tools include websites and various social media sites. Merely having

a website or presence on the internet is not enough, as social media technologies are growing in popularity among small and medium businesses (Vie, 2018). At the operational level, business owners use social media for many purposes, including promoting products and services, marketing, customer education, and relationship management in terms of brand and engagement with the business (Braojos-Gomez et al., 2015). For business owners to effectively use social media, they should focus on ensuring they cover the seven functional blocks of social media, including identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Kietzmann et al. (2011) noted it is essential to understand not all functional blocks need to be present in all social media activity. Identity refers to profiles included on sites that need to be complete and accurate for customers to get the necessary information required, and conversations refer to how businesses communicate with customers (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Businesses must respond to customers promptly so customers know the business is responsive to their needs and concerns (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Sharing refers to the exchange and distribution of content, which should be timely and value-added for customers, and presence refers to knowing where others are in the online environment (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Building relationships and maintaining a good reputation with customers in the online environment is also critically important for businesses. Relationships represent the association that leads to conversations among users and small businesses, and reputation refers to a matter of trust and identification of one's standing on social media (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Finally, the group functional blocks refer to online communities about a company or its products and services, and businesses must have a presence within these communities (Kietzmann et al., 2011). These

functional areas are imperative for small businesses to address, and not doing so could produce undesirable results of using social media and could make their marketing attempts ineffective.

### ***Websites***

With the advancements in ICT, websites have proved to be influential online marketing tools. Today, most businesses run their websites to increase their visibility in the marketplace (Tiago & Veríssimo, 2014). In online marketing, a well-designed website will not always translate to desired customer traffic, but it helps. Thus, in addition to the launch of a website, a small business may consider adopting a search engine marketing strategy. This strategy also referred to as search engine optimization encompasses a variety of strategies and techniques aimed at driving traffic to websites and ultimately to stores. One way of realizing search engine marketing is through high-ranking placement in search results (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). The importance of this technique is it enhances the rank of a business website, which increases site visibility in search results. This conclusion is supported because all internet users use engines to access the internet (Baye et al., 2016). Therefore, besides designing and launching a website, businesses should also consider increasing its relevance to users by adopting search engine optimization. This requirement may also explain why small businesses are reluctant to embrace online marketing because they cannot afford to optimize their sites (Baye et al., 2016).

Regardless, websites are a powerful online marketing tool all companies should adopt.

### ***Social Networking***

Social networking is defined in several ways. Obar and Wildman (2015) used the term social networking to define a dedicated website or application space where users communicate with one another. Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social networking as simply a network of social interactions among individuals that can be used to connect with and track the activity of

others. A more inclusive definition that fits well for business owners as defined by Evans and McKee (2010) is “social networking is the collective use of social media tools and everyone contained within, as well as, a place (virtual) where social interactions and social networking occurs” (p. 353). This definition implies social networking is not just an act of being social with a group of people or just an online space, but a combination of both. Social networking sites have changed the communication patterns between the target market and the businesses by allowing two-way communication (Claffey & Brady, 2014).

Social networking sites are web-based and allow users to create profiles, connect with users who have similar interests, view content posted by users, and communicate with these users (Alhidari et al., 2015). The nature of social networking sites affords small business owners opportunities to not only market their products and services, but it also allows them to interact and engage with consumers, which helps build trusting relationships (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). According to Claffey and Brady (2014), two-way communication between the businesses and their target audience has two significant benefits. First, businesses have an opportunity to build their brand and reputation. Second, it allows businesses to receive feedback from customers and respond to any problems promptly. As social networking sites evolve, small businesses should take advantage of these innovations to grow their customer base and target markets (Hodge et al., 2015). Social networking is broad, and it involves an array of tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Kuofie et al., 2015; Phua & Jin, 2016). While the overall purpose of social networking sites is very similar, each type of network is used to attract different types of customers (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

Facebook provides companies with a unique opportunity to specifically target users and spawn a two-way conversation with them. It is also the most popular social networking site, with

over 400 million active users (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). The users of this social networking site connect with others to form networks and groups where specific to businesses, information, comments, and pictures related to products and services can be exchanged (Ellison et al., 2014). Sponsored postings, banner advertisements, and sidebar advertisements are all different ways a business can choose to advertise on Facebook (Aslam & Karjaluoto, 2017). According to Alhabash et al. (2014), more than one million businesses use Facebook to promote their products and services to customers, most of which are medium to large-sized organizations. This is even more evidence of the reasons why rural small businesses should adopt internet marketing as a part of their strategy if they wish to remain competitive. According to Mariani and Mohammed (2014), as consumers interact with business products and services in an online environment, additional word of mouth advertising for the business occurs.

Twitter is a second popular social networking site, with over 320 million monthly active users (Sewell, 2013). Twitter is a microblogging tool that allows *tweets* of 280 characters or less (Barbera, 2014). Unlike Facebook, tweets should be more specific and targeted to catch a consumer's attention due to the limited characters. This platform helps with customer engagement and propagating the conversation about one's products or services. It can be used to help build relationships with stakeholders (Castronovo & Huang, 2012). According to Abeza and O'Reilly (2014), businesses can use Twitter as a tool to engage and interact with customers to build brand loyalty and trust. Users of Twitter can tweet about products and services and businesses usually add a link to their product or service website to drive customer traffic (Swani et al., 2013). Twitter campaigns can also help rural small business owners gain traction and followers to their page (Abeza & O'Reilly, 2014).

Instagram is one of the top three social media channels used by teenagers and young adults (Colliander & Marder, 2018). Instagram is a photo-sharing site most businesses use for business purposes to provide product information to teenagers, young adults, and millennials (Colliander & Marder, 2018). Like Facebook and Twitter, Instagram can be used to connect businesses with their consumers but through pictures. Instagram can boost business traffic and revenues by allowing the business to make connections with customers in ways their customers can relate to through images (Garifova, 2016). Businesses should post photos about their products and services that are inspirational to their followers to create a unique network of followers through pictures, which facilitates two-way communication (Claffey & Brady, 2014).

In this digital era, social media is considered the primary means of networking; hence, it is a strategic necessity for small business owners (Sigue & Biboum, 2019). According to researchers, many users spend as much as three hours per day on social networking platforms (Alhidari et al., 2015; Nobre & Silva, 2014). Many researchers affirm there is an increased focus on social media as a platform for developing a competitive advantage among businesses (Bostanshirin, 2014). For small businesses, social media is an innovative and promising medium for internet marketing. Many researchers have also highlighted the importance of social networking as a part of small and medium-sized businesses' marketing strategies (Jones et al., 2013; Nobre & Silva, 2014). Social media platforms offer companies the opportunity to boost brand awareness, broaden customer reach and engagement, and increase direct selling and advertisement (Bell & Loane, 2011; Fan & Tsai, 2014; Jones et al., 2015). Like in the cases of websites, an online social media presence would not necessarily translate to a broader market reach; hence, businesses should create exciting content to increase shares and circulation of the message within the online community (Kuofie et al., 2015). This aspect accounts for the

difference between large and small businesses in terms of social media use. The former tries to employ more advanced tactics to increase online presence and information sharing. Some of the tactics employed include social lead generation and advertising, which tend to lack among small businesses (Bostanshirin, 2014). This explains the limited scope of the use of social media among small businesses. Nevertheless, social media platforms are innovative, effective, and affordable means of internet marketing all small traders ought to adopt and implement.

### ***Others***

Internet marketing is not limited to only websites and social media. It also features other methods. Blogging by the small business owner or appointed employee is also another method. According to Lepkowska-White and Kortright (2018), blogging is a great marketing tool since 73% of bloggers and readers trust each other because blogs tend to be perceived as unbiased in nature as well as credible. There are also different forms of online marketing, which include viral marketing, affiliate marketing, online advertising, and email marketing (Bostanshirin, 2014). The application of these platforms depends on the type of business model and marketing objectives of the business and is accessible to both large and small firms.

### **Best Practices in Internet Marketing**

Social networks offer businesses of all sizes considerable marketing capability to reach their target audiences and convert them into actual customers. To achieve maximum benefits, small business owners are encouraged to use appropriate advertising and communication techniques to convey the intended information, establish strategic client relationships, elicit engaging discussions, and provide the much-needed goods and services. Primarily, through these platforms, companies can adequately inform their customers, assess and understand the changing market informational and knowledge needs, observe users' interaction, involvement, and interest

in their organizational activities, and give and receive constructive feedback. All these outcomes are possible if business owners adopt the best practices and effective internet and social media use. By developing the technical knowhow, exerting effort, promoting extensive customer engagement, and disseminating quality, timely and relevant content, business owners can master the art of commanding attention, driving purchase intentions, and converting potential customers into customers through internet marketing.

### ***Content***

Effective social media use depends on how business owners adopt and apply the four basics of Internet marketing. According to Icha and Agwu (2015), content, engagement, skills, and consistency are the core practices of maintaining a dynamic online presence. The first one is the backbone of web-based interactive platforms. The authors posited that site administrators must regularly publicize fresh and relevant information to command traffic (Icha & Agwu, 2015). This statement brings into question the relevance of content management in social media consumer messaging. According to Ashley and Tuten (2015), business owners should provide frequent data updates and utilize creative strategies, such as experiential, imagery, and exclusive communications to optimize these platforms. Besides, they should include inducements for consumer participation to shift product information dissemination from a transactional to an interactive perspective. This tactic will enable the customers to own the goods and services as a part of their identity (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Therefore, business owners must strive to provide quality and relevant content promptly.

Satisfactory online information management constitutes an efficient social media strategy. Kumar et al. (2016) considered that firm-generated content (FGC) positively impacts consumer spending and cross-buying behavior. Therefore, businesses must appraise the kind of

information they post on the Internet. Besides, Jiao et al. (2015) said they should offer customers the opportunity to contribute, create, consume, and exchange knowledge online to enhance their flow experiences. Nonetheless, businesses should not engage them blindly, but rather communicate their brand's uniqueness, and at the same time, appeal to their social and content values (Jiao et al., 2015). Thus, besides the identified data qualities, ideal information management approaches should feature interactive feedback mechanisms.

### ***Engagement***

As previously indicated, customer participation is a critical success factor in online marketing. Icha and Agwu (2015) posited that extensive audience engagement positively influences consumers' perception of an organization. More specifically, they consider active firms as friendly and accountable. These insights translate into sales, goodwill, brand loyalty, and patronage on the part of the company (Icha & Agwu, 2015). Therefore, there is much to gain by encouraging and promoting a bidirectional business-customer communication relationship.

Online consumer reviews and Internet communities are ideal practices in this area. Firm-created web-based groups provide platforms for customers to voice their concerns and directly interact with business agents. According to Munnukka et al. (2015), there is a strong association between online brand community membership and consumer loyalty. Furthermore, involvement in these assemblies stimulates purchasing intentions, enhances social networking, and improves impression management. The last item is of considerable significance because it relates to word-of-mouth (WOM) and promotion behaviors, particularly in Facebook product communities (Munnukka et al., 2015). To contextualize, Munnukka et al. (2015) postulated that consumers assign significant value to peer opinions and recommendations as opposed to FGC. The hallmarks of all these activities are unrivaled consumer loyalty and substantial financial gains to

concerned businesses (Manchanda et al., 2015). Therefore, emerging companies are advised to establish online communities to deepen consumer engagement.

Allowing and fostering online customer reviews is equally beneficial to a corporate entity. As previously defined, social networks offer businesses a platform to assess and comprehend the changing market informational and knowledge needs. Based on this understanding, entrepreneurs can design goods and services according to customers' preferences or feedback. From a marketing perspective, product commentaries can drive sales by motivating purchase intentions (Munnukka et al., 2015). Wang et al. (2015) considered consumer-to-consumer communication about products to be the most critical marketplace information source for buyers. According to Lim and Van Der Heide (2015) and Munnukka et al. (2015), customers regard peer testimonials or buyer-authored comments as more dependable and credible than FGC or industry-provided information. For this reason, Ismagilova et al. (2017) acknowledged electronic WOM, particularly regarding its effects on customers' attitudes, purchase intentions, sales, and information adoption and overload, has attracted scholars' attention. Therefore, the issue has been a subject of increased investigation in the recent past, which is a testimony of its impact on a company.

### ***Skills***

This dimension concerns a business owner's capacity to run a successful social media campaign. To sustain a vibrant online presence, an entrepreneur must possess related skills such as site optimization, monitoring, graphics manipulation, research, and analytics (Icha & Agwu, 2015). A manager should know when to update and deploy creative strategies like experiential, imagery, and exclusive communications that optimize benefits from these platforms as specified by Ashley and Tuten (2015). Besides, a good manager grants the customers the opportunity to

participate, create, consume, and contribute to content management to increase their own flow experiences (Jiao et al., 2015). Thus, administrators must know their target audiences and have the technical expertise to leverage the social media capabilities to advance organizational goals.

### ***Consistency***

Consistency is the key to fruitful internet marketing. More specifically, Vukasovič (2013) posited “through the combination of the stimulus of consistent communications and satisfactory usage and experience, brand awareness, confidence and brand equity are built” (p. 57). The idea is business owners must exert effort and commit to sustaining the social media campaign to the end (Icha & Agwu, 2015). For example, according to Ashley and Tuten (2015), businesses with the most tweets in a given period tend to register a higher number of followers. Besides, entities that use most social media channels enjoy a broader fan base and record higher engagement scores (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). These statements demonstrate companies are not limited to a specific medium and use frequency. In any case, organizations with cross-media presence and intensive platform utilization command a wider market and considerable customer engagement. Therefore, businesses should update their social media accounts regularly and consistently.

### **Effective Social Media Use**

The Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action (AIDA) theory provides a framework for strategic social media use among small businesses in rural areas. According to Hassan et al. (2015), the model entails a four-step formula through which companies can command attention, elicit curiosity, drive purchase intentions, and convert potential customers into actual customers. However, the framing of these phases features various elements of the previously defined basics of Internet marketing. A review of this concept demonstrates different ways business people can use the Internet to advance organizational goals.

### ***Attention***

In general terms, attention refers to awareness or consciousness. However, in this context it concerns ways in which managers can create product or service awareness among shoppers (Hassan et al., 2015). Hassan et al. (2015) listed a range of strategies firms can use to realize this objective, which include search engine optimization, customer referrals, affiliate marketing, and cross-channel advertising. Other applicable methods include creating brand communities, encouraging customer reviews, frequent content updates, and fostering bi-directional customer engagement. All these tactics are adequately discussed in the preceding sections.

### ***Interest***

As previously defined, the interest component deals with methods designed to provoke inquisitiveness on the part of the client. According to Hassan et al. (2015), it is all about captivating customers to take note of the offered goods and services and allowing them to assess and ascertain whether they meet their expectations or not. In this stage, the authors indicate precise product information communication, timely and constant content update, appropriate brand name and image messaging, and proper imagery use are effective in motivating the consumers to act (Hassan et al., 2015). Like in the previous case, all these tactics are adequately discussed in the best practices section.

### ***Desire***

Business owners are obligated to employ different tools to inspire a longing for product ownership, which they offer in the market. From Hassan et al.'s (2015) viewpoint, companies can realize this objective through experiential, attractive imagery and exclusive communications, special discounts, regular wall updates, and excellent pre-sale customer service offerings. A combination of these techniques will hasten a business deal closure.

### ***Action***

The primary objective of any form of marketing is to transform potential buyers into actual shoppers. According to Hassan et al. (2015), organizations can motivate action through clear communication about ordering processes, payment options, and delivery methods. Besides, fostering consumers' participation may also increase purchase intentions as they grow to own the goods and services on sale as part of their identity (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). With these methods, small businesses have a chance to compete against established firms at all market levels.

All it takes to optimize social media marketing is to develop the technical knowhow, exert effort, promote extensive customer engagement, and disseminate quality, timely, and relevant content. These best practices will enable small sellers to master the art of commanding attention, elicit curiosity, drive purchase intentions, and convert potential customers into actual customers. The AIDA framework provides the necessary steps to follow. In general, the core issue is entrepreneurs must learn to balance different social media advertising strategies depending on their desired endgame.

### **Marketing in Small Businesses**

A study by Alford and Page (2015) investigated the adoption of marketing technology by small businesses. The study involved a sample population of 24 entrepreneurs, and the research findings showed a strong enthusiasm for marketing and recognition of its opportunities. A similar study by Turner and Endres (2017) examined the approaches for promoting success in small businesses. According to the researchers, the small business owners depend on systems of actions that incorporate marketing. The findings revealed developing aggressive marketing techniques aids business owners in creating niche markets. Alford and Page (2015) posited small businesses use the value of the internet in marketing through process reengineering, management

skills, and innovation experience for sustainable competitive advantages. Research shows the application of web-based marketing by small businesses is limited due to the availability of resources (Alford & Page, 2015). This argument was supported by Turner and Endres (2017), who suggested the failure of small businesses in internet marketing is associated with a lack of capital. Marketing is considered an essential tool for promoting business operations among small business owners.

A study by Blankson et al. (2018) examined the marketing practices of rural small businesses in Ghana. The research findings show small and medium enterprises engage in commercial activities to survive in a competitive subsistence marketplace. According to the research, micro-businesses and owners use the internet as a marketing tool to grow and fund their businesses (Blankson et al., 2018). Marketing practices among small and medium-sized enterprises differ depending on the business location. Another research study by Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015) investigated the use of digital marketing among small business owners. The purpose of the study was to provide an insight into the utilization of the internet in marketing and to examine the factors influencing its application. The findings of the research supported the Blankson et al. (2018) argument that small and medium-sized enterprises use marketing as a tool to promote their competitive advantage. Conversely, owners fail to use the full potential of digital marketing due to the availability of limited resources (Alford & Page, 2015; Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Therefore, it can be noted the internet is a vital marketing tool for small and medium-sized enterprises, but the availability of resources limits its use.

He et al. (2017) noted the internet is a hub for marketing products and services for small businesses. The researchers examined why small businesses use social media as a tool for advertising goods and services. In the study, the researchers found the local market is considered

small for selling the products of rural small businesses. The authors posited small institutions rely on word of mouth advertising to attract new customers. The argument is supported by Rita et al. (2018), who stated in their research, small businesses need to understand the sales patterns and profiles of consumers to promote marketing practices. Therefore, small business owners should engage in effective marketing strategies linked with customer persuasion methods to achieve success. With the aid of the internet, small business owners can build a strong customer base and access niche markets through the adoption of technology (Alford & Page, 2015). From the recent literature, successful adoption of the internet has a significant influence on business operations.

### **Rural Small Business Characteristics**

Rural small businesses are considered needed institutions within local and competitive markets (Lekhanya, 2016). According to the researcher, a firm's survival increases with its size and growth diminishes with age. Lekhanya (2016) posited that small and medium-sized enterprises are vulnerable to failure due to insufficient resources to support managerial and marketing operations. The researcher also found that unskilled employees usually run a majority of small businesses. Due to the limited access to information and the size of management, small businesses typically rely on owners' personal experience and skills. According to Lekhanya (2016), the small business sector has unique disadvantages and challenges that have a significant impact on their survival.

Ahmad et al. (2015) noted one of the main characteristics of a small business has the inability to adopt new technology at an appropriate pace. The researchers found the factors affecting the adoption of technology include perceived compatibility, manager's/owners skills, and knowledge, perceived relative advantage, external change agents, and management features.

According to research by Sedera et al. (2016), small businesses lack the necessary resources to compete with established companies within the same industries. Moreover, a lack of adequate finances hinders the business investment methods, particularly in marketing, of most small businesses (Lekhanya, 2016). Small business owners tend to save on expenses related to marketing as a way of minimizing the high cost of operations (Kraus et al., 2017).

According to research by Blanchard (2015), small businesses in rural settings understand their customers' requirements and needs better compared to urban businesses. As a result, entrepreneurs develop higher entrepreneurial features due to the proximity of their customers. In turn, this facilitates the growth of their businesses. However, the inability of the rural small businesses to align their services and products with external demands is the main drawback of their planned growth (Lekhanya, 2016).

### **Rural Small Business Challenges in Marketing**

Chimucheka and Mandipaka (2015) noted the growth and sustainability of a small business are threatened by the obstacles that exist in management functions and marketing practices. According to the researchers, small businesses experience challenges in accessing appropriate and effective information and technology relating to marketing. A corresponding study by Rugova and Prenaj (2016) supported this argument by stating the lack of understanding of internet marketing contributes to the underutilization of the innovation. According to a study by Chimucheka and Mandipaka (2015), small business owners cannot afford the high cost of accessing advisory services and training in the area of internet marketing. It is common that small business owners or management teams do not recognize the need to upgrade their skills due to complacency (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2015). A more recent study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) noted the lack of awareness is one of the key barriers to the adoption of the internet as

a marketing tool by small businesses. Undeniably, limited information literacy remains a significant challenge for small business owners locally and globally.

A study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) showed the adoption of technology in marketing is subject to the financial position of small business owners. According to Sedera et al. (2016), the resource-based theory explains resources owned by business owners differentiate the performance levels and makes provision for the competitive advantage of businesses. Karimi and Naghibi (2015) found some differences existed in marketing practices between small and large organizations due to access to required resources. Small businesses are limited by a lack of finances and time to research and support marketing practices. As a result, institutions cannot adopt advanced and effective technology to advertise their products or services (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). A corresponding study by Baporikar et al. (2016) supported the argument by stating small and medium-sized enterprise marketers face internal barriers during the adoption of the internet as a marketing tool due to inadequate financial resources.

Rahman et al. (2016) noted one of the significant challenges affecting small businesses is the lack of skills when adopting web-based marketing. The authors affirmed small business owners ignore management skills relating to marketing practices since they solely depend on personal skills (Rahman et al., 2016). A similar study by Ebitu et al. (2015) supported the argument by noting lack of skills in marketing research and resources, as well as control and planning, is one of the main challenges facing small and medium enterprises. Research shows small businesses cannot adopt modern marketing strategies, thus experience difficulties in advertising and applying promotional tools (Ebitu et al., 2015). In addition to the lack of knowledge and finances, small business owners fail due to a lack of expertise in adopting the current marketing approaches.

### ***Rural Small Business Success***

According to Turner and Endres (2017), small business owners experiencing a niche market achieve sustainable growth. The research findings also highlighted successful strategies for small and medium-sized enterprises are attributed to focused differentiation in advertisement and innovative marketing. Prosperity in business is associated with effective customer services and community perception (Turner & Endres, 2017). Chi (2015) supported this argument by stating that differentiation strategies account for high performance and reduced costs within small businesses. The findings of the study revealed forward-looking business owners proactively shift their approaches to differentiating marketing and management practices (Chi, 2015). Newton et al. (2015) noted differentiation by small and medium enterprises in the U.S. encompasses innovation to create a competitive environment and achieve sustainability. Kraus et al. (2017) posited there is a significant interplay between innovation, resource management, and sustainability. The process of differentiation makes provision for small business owners to realize success and motivation due to its ability to enhance performance and product promotion.

Agbenyegah's (2018) study noted high costs of operation characterize rural businesses as compared to large organizations. The findings of the research associated a limited market as the main constraint for small and medium enterprises in rural settings. According to Muller et al. (2017), cooperation strategies aid small business owners to overcome the primary challenges in internet marketing and achieve sustainability. The research findings show that the adoption of new business models fosters the potential of small businesses to address the managerial and marketing issues that hinder growth. A corresponding study by Martinsuo and Luomaranta (2018) supported the argument by stating that small business owners with the ability to implement partial solutions to overcome specific barriers lead to success. To address the

obstacles, small and medium-sized businesses adopt new solutions (Gupta & Barua, 2017).

Therefore, success is a product of overwhelming coordination problems, cost reduction, and opposition to growth (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2016). It is apparent that rural small business owners need to focus on addressing the eminent barriers attributed to failure.

In their research, Perry et al. (2018) noted while small business owners invest in their businesses, about 50% of small businesses achieve sustainability within the first five years. The success is attributed to the commercialization of innovative ideas to produce new goods and services. Perry et al. (2018) study's findings showed the external and internal factors account for successful entrepreneurs within the U.S. According to Lussier et al. (2016), small and medium-sized enterprises attain success when adequate capital and managerial skills are adopted to enhance their competitive advantage. The triumph of small enterprises is vested in the owners' experiences. A study by Golder (2019) affirmed that small businesses within the U.S. represent a significant part of the economy. The success of the small and medium-sized enterprise translates to a strong and stable national growth (Golder, 2019). A corresponding study based on the resource-based model by Campbell and Park (2017) noted the success of small businesses is based on the adoption of innovation and the availability of financial resources.

### ***Rural Small Business Failures***

A 2008 report by the U.S. Small Business Administration estimated that 641,000 small and medium-sized enterprises closed, while there were 597,000 startups during one year (Perry et al., 2018). The figures show the survival rate of small and medium-sized enterprises is limited by various factors, including internal and external factors. The available research affirms the failure of small business owners is contributed by the limited resources at their disposal for the investments (Parsa & Van der Rest, 2017). Across the rural setting, investors encounter

hardships and lack of market for the products and services. The research conducted by Lekhanya (2016) indeed highlighted the growth and development of small and medium-sized enterprises are deterred by the lack of such infrastructure facilities as technology and roads. According to Walsh and Cunningham (2016), one of the major problems facing small and medium-sized enterprises is they do not achieve sustainability. A majority of the businesses are phased out by well-established companies with the required resource capacity to support marketing practices and employ skilled workers. A study by Parsa and Van der Rest (2017) exemplified that local small businesses have unique challenges, which influence their profitability and growth.

Noticeably, many small and medium-sized enterprises within the U.S. collapse due to the lack of necessary managerial experience and training (Nolan & Garavan, 2016). According to Asah et al. (2015), the lack of knowledge contributes to poor managerial abilities to plan and control the marketing and financial requirements of small businesses. Small and medium-sized enterprises' failure is attributed to the lack of efficient management of the available human resources and implementation of strategic plans. The current research shows skills play a vital role in enhancing business performance (Asah et al., 2015). Due to overreliance on personal abilities and experience, small business owners misjudge the importance of promoting their competitive advantage and differentiating their product through advertisements. By failing to address the critical development challenges facing small businesses, several investments are forced to halt their operations (McCann & Ortega-Argilés, 2016). From the available literature, skills and knowledge are both factors that determine the failure or success of small enterprises.

Sedera et al. (2016) noted the resource-based theory explains the role of resources in ensuring the sustainability of a business. For small firms to adopt the current technology, adequate finances need to be provided by managers and owners. However, local small and

medium-sized enterprises lack the necessary resources to fund and acquire effective technology for marketing their products. According to research by Nolan and Garavan (2016), most small businesses do not have access to sufficient market information, thus are outdone by more established businesses. Ramayah et al. (2016) also noted the change of technology has contributed to the failure of small and medium-sized enterprises due to the inability to adapt and lack of finances to fund the high cost of implementation. A recent study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) posited that small business owners could not keep up with technological dynamics, especially in marketing.

### **Factors Influencing Internet Adoption**

The adoption of the internet for marketing is essential for business survival, but owners understand little about it. According to research, technology has the potential to change small businesses in various ways, including customer relationships, new markets access, co-creation, business-to-business collaboration, and customization (Alford & Page, 2015). Soltani et al. (2015) posited the introduction of marketing practices and the use of innovation make provision for such institutions to enhance efficiency. Alford and Page (2015) supported this argument by explaining firms that utilize the unique value of the web through innovation and process reengineering are likely to achieve sustainable advantage. The authors affirmed the adoption of technology as a marketing tool depends on various resources, which include monetary and time (Alford & Page, 2015; Soltani et al., 2015). According to Ramayah et al. (2016), one of the main reasons for small and medium enterprises' reluctance to implement technology in marketing is the limitation of the available resources.

Based on the technology acceptance model, the adoption and use of the internet have been a major concern influenced by different factors such as contextual and technology attributes

(Dwivedi et al., 2019). Ahmad et al. (2015) noted the current business environment requires small businesses to stay competitive within the marketplace domestically. According to the research findings, small and medium enterprises strive to enhance their competitive advantage by developing better methods to address consumers' needs. As a result, institutions have focused on adopting the internet as a marketing tool due to its benefit to the business (Ahmad et al., 2015). Razak and Latip (2016) found social media is an effective approach for small and medium enterprises to advertise goods and services. Their argument was supported by Soltani et al.'s (2015) research stated the use of technology is influenced by various aspects, which include finance, competition, and skills.

Ramayah et al. (2016) noted internal factors such as adoption attitude, innovativeness, organizational size, and workers' knowledge influence the use of technology in marketing. The researchers affirmed the adoption of the internet depends on both internal and external aspects. The findings were exemplified by Razak and Latip (2016) by stating the factors that influence the use of social media in marketing include trust, cost-effectiveness, interactivity, and compatibility. Noticeably, there is an increase in the number of small and medium enterprises adopting internet marketing due to its capacity to offer flexibility and enhance the ability to respond to opportunities (Al-Alawi & Al-Ali, 2015). A corresponding study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) affirmed awareness, limited skills, poor investment, and limited information are vital aspects for the adoption of technology among rural small businesses. The researchers noted technological infrastructure remains a critical aspect that determines the level of adoption by SMEs. According to the current research, internal factors have a significant impact on the espousal of the internet for marketing practices by small and medium enterprises.

## **Barriers to Internet Adoption**

Enabling factors also doubles as potential barriers to the use of online marketing among rural small businesses. These factors relate to the deficiency in human resources and managerial skills and the problem of integrity, security, privacy, and trust. Other notable challenges entail location, network infrastructure issues, affordability of an e-business model, and legal uncertainties. These elements explain why most rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing and account for owners' experience in implementing internet marketing strategies.

### ***Human Resources & Managerial Skills Factors***

Human resources are both enablers and barriers to the use of internet marketing. A majority of rural small enterprises lack human technological resources to run an online marketing infrastructure. This factor explains the lack of awareness of the potential benefits of internet marketing among small firms (Jones et al., 2015). Furthermore, it accounts for the limited scope of use of internet marketing as a consequence of the lack of an incentive to use an e-commerce business model. In essence, inadequate internal technological capabilities discourage small business owners from adopting internet marketing for security reasons, as highlighted earlier. Besides, small businesses are prone to system malfunction and cyber-attacks due to inadequacy in internal technological capacity and lack of competent information communication technology personnel (Storey, 2004). Lastly, rural areas tend to be disadvantaged in terms of information communication technology infrastructure development, which makes information communication technology services unavailable for small businesses that cannot afford to develop their systems (Philip & Williams, 2019; Saleminik et al., 2017). In this regard, small business owners should build core competencies, acquire robust internal technology

infrastructure, and reorganize organizational processes and structure to tap the potential of implementing online marketing strategies.

### ***Access, Interoperability, and Cost Factors***

While most small businesses have access to broadband infrastructure, their application in online marketing may be limited by interoperability issues of information and communication technology systems. Richmond et al. (2017) acknowledges this and asserted that many rural businesses are not using internet-based technology for marketing, even when they have access to requisite information and communication technology infrastructure. Generally, small companies lack robust internal information and communication technology infrastructure and managerial and organizational skills to create and sustain a stable e-commerce system. To a greater extent, this problem is perpetuated by the high cost of developing and maintaining an e-commerce business model (Storey, 2004). Firms require a substantial amount of resources to build a highly and seamlessly integrated e-business system. Most rural small businesses suffer from budget constraints and the problem of interoperability of systems is likely to arise (Bostanshirin, 2014). Additionally, most of these businesses are unaware of the expected returns on the investment because they cannot conduct market research and forecast the profitability of the venture. Besides the cost of the acquisition of information and communication technology infrastructure, maintaining the system is equally expensive. Here, the element of ongoing costs discourages business owners from pursuing this path.

### ***Security and Privacy Factors***

Security and privacy is a major concern in the electronic world, particularly regarding data sharing. In online marketing, security and privacy concerns create a divide between small and large businesses. The former tend to be disadvantaged in terms of buyer confidence relative

to the latter based on the strength of their respective brand names (Bostanshirin, 2014; Storey, 2004). Here, the distinguishing feature is that large firms have recognizable brand names as compared to small enterprises. From the customer perspective, online shoppers associate brand recognition with credibility, a factor that explains why most online clients are reluctant to buy from small and less known enterprises (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2018; Riquelme & Román, 2014). For these reasons, small business owners should develop a professional website to increase their credibility. Also, they should invest in security systems to safeguard customers' credit information and guarantee secure transactions. These requirements tend to discourage small business owners from utilizing online marketing citing high costs of acquisition of system protection and security measures (Chakraborty & Bhat, 2018). Other concerns include payment uncertainties and contracts, potential attacks from viruses and hackers, and guarantee uncertainties. These concerns are even more pronounced in rural areas where IT infrastructure and the business environment are under-developed.

### ***Legal Factors***

A robust online presence exposes a firm to numerous legal risks related to issues of compliance, data security, privacy, and cross-border transactions. The primary legal concerns relate to problems of data security and privacy. This policy applies to situations involving cross-border data transfer and interchange (Meltzer, 2015). Here, firms are required to comply with special data protection legal requirements to ensure the safety of private consumer information. As a result, businesses are required to install security systems to safeguard consumer information and avoid risks of legal suits in case of a breach. From an international perspective, legal uncertainties arise due to differences in regulatory environments governing cross-border transactions (Meltzer, 2015; Storey, 2004). According to a report sponsored by the Information

Technology and Innovation Foundation, the global marketplace lacks a harmonized legal framework to guide cross-border transactions (Cory, 2017). Without this framework, international legal rulings are unenforceable, a factor that discourages online sales. In such an environment, small enterprises are discouraged from venturing into the global market because they cannot run and maintain a legal department. Additionally, it is costly to tackle and keep up to date with ongoing developments in the regulatory environment in multiple jurisdictions. Overall, legal uncertainties are a significant bottleneck to the adoption of online marketing for small businesses that wish to venture into the international market.

### ***Summary of the Literature Review***

This literature review can be summed up by two theoretical frameworks: the technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm theory. The former describes business owners' behavior towards accepting or rejecting technology, while the latter demonstrates the need for business owners to assess the respective resource capacities of the firms for planning purposes. Under the technology acceptance model, it is evident the main bottlenecks to the use of online marketing among rural small businesses are perceived usefulness and ease of use. Most small businesses are yet to realize the benefits of online marketing, and at the same time, they lack requisite technological and human capacities to realize a return from this form of advertising. Here, the potential of online marketing includes greater customer engagement, considerable market exposure, and revenue generation. On the other hand, the main barriers to the use of internet marketing encompass legal uncertainties, security and privacy concerns, lack of managerial skills on the part of the business owners, and inadequate human resources competent in matters of information and communications technologies. Also, the problem of access, interoperability e-business systems, and costs of developing and maintaining such

systems inhibit the adoption and deployment of online marketing tools. From a resource-based view of the firm theory perspective, online marketing is considered to be an effective marketing strategy with significant potential to represent the main elements of an adequate marketing mix. With this potential, small businesses can leverage various internet marketing tools, such as websites and social media, to realize internet marketing's full potential.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 1**

The qualitative inquiry into the factors that influence rural small business owner's adoption of internet marketing is critical for small business success in terms of customer traffic and revenue generation. Through in-depth interviews with rural small business owners, the knowledge gained from this study can help uncover factors that may pose a barrier. The researcher provided in section 1 the general and specific business problem and the method used to conduct the research. A review of literature also contributed to explaining the need for the research study in relation to rural small business owners and their failure to use internet marketing as a strategy. Section 2 will provide an overview of the participants, the case study design and qualitative methodology, the population and sampling used, and data collection and analysis.

## **Section 2: The Project**

Understanding why rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing can help businesses survive who do not succeed due to not utilizing internet marketing, which results in a lack of visibility and low revenue generation. The objective of this qualitative study focused specifically on exploring the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners within the southeastern United States, resulting in a loss of customer traffic and revenues. In the following section, the researcher will discuss the project. Section 2 will begin with a review of the purpose statement to remind the reader why understanding the complex issue is a relevant issue to address. The researcher will discuss the researcher's central role in the study and the participants from whom data will be collected. The researcher will also discuss the research method and design, the population targeted and selection of the sample, and its appropriateness for the current study. From there, the data collection process will be outlined and will include the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data organization techniques. Finally, the researcher will discuss data analysis techniques, reliability and validity issues, and conclude with a summary.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how rural small business owners make decisions related to using internet marketing as a marketing strategy. This study uncovered relevant factors that influence the business owner's decision-making process to understand the business owner's experiences. Mohan and Ali (2019) stated there are many challenges small businesses face when adopting internet marketing. Therefore, future qualitative studies are recommended to explore these challenges in a different context to determine what challenges are unique to small businesses and what challenges are universal. This study addressed a gap in the

literature related to factors that influence rural small business owners' lack of internet marketing adoption. Addressing this gap can help rural small business owners identify the barriers related to their marketing strategy and create a plan to overcome these barriers. This study will also serve as a potential resource for future qualitative studies on the decision-making process for rural small business owners' internet marketing strategies. This larger problem is explored through an in-depth study of the lack of internet marketing strategies used by small rural businesses within the southeastern United States and how the businesses are affected.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in this study was to explore the lack of internet marketing strategies used by small rural businesses within the southeastern United States and how their businesses are affected as a result. According to Stake (2010), the researcher is responsible for designing the overall study to provide answers to the research questions that frame the study. The researcher was also responsible for identifying and contacting participants, as well as conducting participant interviews. In qualitative research, the researcher is more involved during the data collection phase, which is a benefit of this method (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher was also responsible for ensuring participant confidentiality while collecting and maintaining written and audio records and other data.

The researcher conducted semi-structured participant interviews on the topic of rural small businesses and their use of internet marketing. Using semi-structured interviews helped the researcher ensure she was not guiding or leading a particular response from the participants. According to Mahat-Shamir et al. (2019), it is best to use semi-structured interviews when the researcher needs to gain more insight to understand the participant's viewpoints, the researcher wants to empower the participant to respond in the direction they feel is most important, and they

want to understand the complex issue in a new light. The researcher also analyzed, interpreted, and reported findings from the study.

The researcher also recognized it was possible to introduce researcher bias into various phases of the study, including the design, data collection and analysis, and findings sections. According to Yin (2014), before beginning the research study, the researcher should identify any personal experiences, assumptions, and attitudes to limit researcher bias. Epoche, which is the process used by researchers to set aside their previous knowledge, experiences, beliefs, preconceptions, and values (Wadams & Park, 2018) is one method used to help the researcher refrain from introducing researcher bias.

## **Participants**

The researcher carefully selected the study participants based on the U.S. Small Business Administration definition of small business, a for-profit business with fewer than 500 employees, and generates less than \$500,000 in revenues (SBA, 2016). In this study, a small business will refer to businesses that operate with a maximum of 15 employees. Participants were selected based on their geographic location and current use of or lack of internet marketing use. Participants were identified through contacts from the Center for Business and Entrepreneurial Services (CBES) and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at The University of West Alabama in Livingston, AL, through a recruitment email (Appendix A). The researcher and Mr. Donald Mills, SBDC Director, work with rural small business owners who use both centers' services at no cost to help start or expand a small business. The researcher obtained contact information for potential participants who met the study's requirements and then contacted the participants to elicit participation in the study. The researcher interviewed eight rural small business owners located in either Sumter or Marengo counties in Alabama. To conduct an in-

depth study and gain the greatest insight, it is suggested that researchers select a few participants rather than several (Fuggard & Potts, 2015; Guetterman, 2015).

The researcher also took the necessary steps to ensure the ethical protection of participants was adequate. According to Yin (2014), researchers are obligated to ensure ethical practices are followed when conducting a research study. The researcher gained informed consent from all participants in the study and protected their privacy. To maintain the privacy of the participants, the researcher emailed or delivered a consent form (Appendix B) to each to review and complete. The consent form allowed the researcher to gain permission for participation, record audio interviews, and review the small businesses' personnel and financial documents. The researcher designated a code for all small business owners as participants in the written report to maintain confidentiality. The researcher also followed Liberty University's IRB guidelines for conducting a research study.

### **Research Method and Design**

This research study will be conducted using a qualitative methodology and a case study design. This study will explore the factors that influence the small business owner's failure to use internet marketing as a strategy. This section will discuss the reasoning for conducting this study using the qualitative method and case study design.

### ***Discussion of Method***

The research methodology selected for this study is the qualitative research methodology. This methodology facilitates the collection of in-depth information gathering from a group of participants in an effort to understand a complex issue in a real-life context to generate a broader appreciation of this issue (Stake, 2010). Using the qualitative research methodology assists in building a complex and holistic picture of informants from which words and thoughts are

analyzed (Barnham, 2015). According to Krathwohl (2009), when using the qualitative method, a complex issue can be examined in an area where little knowledge currently exists. The decision to use the qualitative methodology was influenced by the need to gather in-depth information to understand why rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing as a marketing strategy.

Qualitative research is best used when the researcher needs to explore a social or human problem or issue (Barnham, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017). This research will attempt to explore why, despite the significant benefits of using internet marketing, the majority of small businesses fail to use this as a strategy (Alford & Page, 2015). Gaining an in-depth understanding of the gaps in the factors that influence rural small business owner's lack of adoption of internet marketing can help rural small business owners identify the barriers related to their business and create a plan to overcome these barriers. There is a need to determine what factors influence the failure to use internet marketing. The lack of internet marketing used by small business owners may inhibit them from attracting enough customers to ensure their businesses remain viable. Therefore, additional research in the area of factors that influence rural small business owner's adoption of internet marketing is needed.

The qualitative research methodology will allow the collection of information to determine the specific factors that influence rural small business owner's decisions. Using the qualitative methodology will help uncover an understanding of the complex issue by examining data from the identified population. This method is appropriate because data can be collected and analyzed from the perspective of the small business owners (Sutton & Austin, 2015). In qualitative research, data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews allow the collection of data from identified participants on their perspective of internet marketing and

resource allocation without being lead to conclusions based on hypotheses developed from previous literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Literature is consistently used in qualitative research when researchers study the experiences of individuals in order to understand an issue (Fletcher et al., 2016; Goncalves & Smith, 2018; Limba et al., 2016). More specifically, researchers have used the qualitative research methodology in studying different aspects of marketing strategies with a focus on small businesses. In justifying the use of this methodology, Richmond et al. (2017) recommended future studies explore what would drive small business owners in rural areas to adopt internet marketing practices. Parker (2014) recommended researchers use the qualitative methodology in studies when there is no need to collect data from a large sample of the population. Bosworth and Turner (2018) used the qualitative research methodology to collect and analyze information on the perspectives of rural businesses to understand their distinctive characteristics and how they can increase capital through internet marketing. Likewise, O'Donnell (2014) used the qualitative research methodology to explore how small businesses engage in marketing their products. The qualitative research method is the best fit for this study because it seeks to discover descriptions and interpretations of the issue related to this specific research study (Stake, 2010).

### ***Discussion of Design***

The case study design was the selected research design for this qualitative study. This design involved studying multiple cases within set boundaries of a real-life setting to gain an understanding of the cases (Campbell, 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). According to Singh (2007), this research design is the preferred method when the researcher is seeking to determine the answers to *how* and *why* questions. The case study research design allows a deeper exploration and understanding of the complex issue. This design will also help uncover the

essential meanings of individual business owners' experiences to gain the insight needed to understand their perspective.

The case study design was most appropriate for this study because the goal is to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to use or not to use internet marketing. This design was also appropriate because it helps uncover the understanding of experiences, meanings, and perspectives from the rural small business owner's viewpoints that are characteristics of qualitative studies (Hammarberg et al., 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended the use of this design when in-depth data needs to be collected to answer the posed research questions. According to Stake (2005), the case study design uses multiple sources of information as a means to gather data to gain a full picture of the complex issue.

Researchers have used the qualitative research method using the case study design to study individuals' experiences related to marketing strategies in business. Alford and Page (2015) used the methodology to address the gap in the literature in marketing technology adoption by small business owners. Likewise, Berglund (2015) used the case study design to explore how small business owners behave and make decisions. Hyett et al. (2014) noted the case study design is a good choice when the researcher has an interest in the participants as well as their experiences. This design was also appropriate for this study because it helped the researcher gather interpreted information from rural small business owners through open-ended questions to determine the factors influencing their decision-making regarding internet marketing (Stake, 2010).

### ***Summary of Research Method and Design***

The qualitative methodology was the best fit for this study because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to adopt internet marketing as a strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The case study research design was selected because it allowed the researcher to obtain an in-depth appreciation of the factors that influence small business owners' failure to use or not use internet marketing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Therefore, the qualitative research method using a case study design was the best fit for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

The population for this study consisted of rural small business owners in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama, with a maximum of 15 employees. The definition of small business is a for-profit business with fewer than 500 employees and generates less than \$500,000 in revenue (SBA, 2016). The participants were selected from contacts from the Center for Business and Entrepreneurial Services (CBES) and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at The University of West Alabama in Livingston, AL. The justification for selecting these organizations to draw participants is because they are located in a rural county and serve rural business owners. The CBES and SBDC serve a rural five-county area, including Sumter, Choctaw, Greene, Marengo, and Wilcox counties in Alabama. These counties are within driving distance of the researcher. The primary aim of both organizations is to provide consulting services and educational programs to entrepreneurs wanting to start or grow a small business (Outreach Services, n.d.). The justification for selecting the sample from businesses who are served by one of these entities is because they are already taking active steps to grow their small business in some way.

The researcher used the purposeful sampling method to enlist participants. The purposeful sampling method was selected because the researcher was seeking to learn and understand as much as possible from a few potential participants. The goal of the research study was to collect in-depth information from business owners who are making decisions regarding this specific issue. Researchers including Palnikas et al. (2015), Robinson (2014), and Isaacs (2014), have used purposeful sampling in qualitative studies and highlighted the importance of its use to gain an in-depth understanding of issues. According to Patton (2015), researchers using purposeful sampling look to select potential participants who are rich in information to gain the greatest insights and in-depth understanding regarding the research questions. To conduct an in-depth study and gain the greatest insight, it is suggested researchers select a few participants rather than several (Guetterman, 2015; Robinson, 2014). Creswell (2013) suggested researchers conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with four to five individuals. Baskarada (2014) suggested a sample size between six and eight participants should allow the researcher to reach data saturation. Boddy (2016) suggested in a case study design when using a single market population, data saturation could be reached with a maximum of 12 in-depth interviews. In addition, Fuggard and Potts (2015) supported this view by suggesting a sample size between four and six potential participants is adequate for an in-depth qualitative study. The researcher will continue interviews with rural small business owners until data saturation is achieved.

Specifically, a criterion-based sampling method helped the researcher ensure the potential participants have experienced the issue being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2017). There were four criteria interview participants must meet to participate in the study. First, the business must be classified as a rural small business with a maximum of 15 employees. Second, to be included in this study, the rural small business must be located in either Sumter or Marengo county in

Alabama. Third, the business owner does not use or ineffectively uses internet marketing as a marketing strategy. Fourth, participants must demonstrate a willingness to participate in the study by signing a consent form provided by the researcher. The goal was to ensure participants could provide purposeful value-added information to help the researcher understand the small business owner's decision-making experiences related to internet marketing.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection began by identifying six to eight rural small business owners from Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama to participate in the study. Each participant participated in an in-depth interview with the researcher. This section will include a description of the data collection instruments used to collect data, the data collection techniques, and the data organization techniques used after the data were collected from participants.

#### ***Instruments.***

The primary data collection instrument in this qualitative study was the semi-structured interview guide. The researcher served as the data collector through written notes and audio recordings. The semi-structured interview guide included an introductory statement, primary interview questions, and a closing statement. The semi-structured interview guide can be found in Appendix C. The interview guide contained 18 semi-structured questions that guided the participants in responding to questions relating to internet marketing and marketing strategies, but allowed the participants to respond openly. The semi-structured interview approach has been used by qualitative researchers previously (Murphy & Kielgast, 2008; Pandey & Chawla, 2016). The interview questions were phrased so participants easily understand the wording, and the language was not ambiguous. The interviews were completed within 45-60 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed after the interviews.

The researcher used the interview questions to ask the small business owners to describe what internet marketing means in the context of their business, their familiarity with internet marketing, and how comfortable they are with using the internet and various internet-marketing tools. This set of questions helped the researcher understand why some business owners fail to adopt internet marketing as a strategy. The second set of interview questions asked the business owner their opinion of internet marketing, how internet marketing could help small businesses, their opinion on how not using internet marketing could impact business and their observation of customer expectations, and satisfaction with their business in regards to internet marketing. This set of questions helped the researcher understand to what extent the small business owners realize the impacts internet marketing could have on their small business. The final set of interview questions asked the small business owners about various factors that influence their decision not to use internet marketing such as general factors, resources, and knowledge of internet and internet marketing tools. This set of questions helped the researcher understand the factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use internet marketing as a strategy. The questions and order of the questions were built on each other so that respondents consider all factors that influence their decision to use or not use internet marketing as a strategy. Using open-ended questions allowed the small business owners to openly address each question related to their lack of internet marketing use.

### ***Data Collection Techniques***

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide with participants. Participants were interviewed once, and all data were collected during that time. The interviews were virtual or face-to-face interviews where the researcher met with the potential participants physically at their desired location or via Zoom (Braun et al., 2017). The face-to-face interview

format was chosen over other methods because most of the participants have not adopted technology for their businesses, and this could have posed a barrier of using technology during the interview. The second reason this method was chosen is because it helped the researcher read nonverbal signs from the business owner's which is important in determining if a follow-up question or clarification on a question is needed. The researcher took notes and audio recorded each interview using the semi-structured interview guide. Audio recording the interviews was imperative so the researcher did not miss key information due to distractions during the interview or while note-taking. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), an audio recording will help the researcher manage the data after the interviews. The audio recording was also essential during the analysis of the data collected from the interviews, along with notes that provided context and headings from the interviews (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2017).

### ***Data Organization Techniques***

The audio data collected during the interviews was saved on a digital audio recorder. After each interview, the researcher downloaded the audio recording on a laptop to ensure there was enough memory on the recorder for subsequent interviews. To keep the data files separated but easily identifiable, each audio file was stored in a separate folder along with the written notes for each interviewee. Each participant was assigned a code, and each file was labeled with that code. Reflexive journaling was used throughout the interview process to help eliminate researcher bias. According to Janesick (2015), reflexive journaling is an effective tool used by researchers to document biases, experiences, and the emotional state of the researcher. A two-step verification method was used to keep data secured on the laptop. The laptop used to store the data were password protected. The primary file which contains the audio and written files also required a password to access the data.

## **Data Analysis**

Yin's (2014) data analysis process, which is a systematic process used in qualitative research, will be used during this phase of the research. The interview data received from respondents was used to answer the posed research questions. According to Yin (2014), the five possible techniques in the data analysis process include pattern matching, explanation building, comparing trends to observed trends, creating logic models, and cross-case synthesis. In this study, the researcher used the explanation building technique, which is a specific type of pattern matching, which determines the cause of how or why something happened (Yin, 2014). This technique was used to explain how business owners make decisions to use or not use internet marketing and cross-case synthesis to combine the findings of the separate cases.

The first step in the analysis process was to organize and prepare the data by transcribing the audio-recordings (Creswell, 2013). The data were transcribed and then paired with the written notes from the interviews to analyze the audio-recordings. Bailey (2008) suggested researchers transcribe audio files into written text before analyzing the data. The researcher followed this guideline by transcribing the audio files into written text, using Microsoft Word, after each interview was conducted. After the audio files were transcribed, the researcher paired any written notes with the transcripts. The second step in the process was coding the data into themes (Creswell, 2013). After data collection and transcription, the researcher uploaded the transcripts with notes to be analyzed and coded through the qualitative text analysis software tool QDA Miner Lite. In the coding process, the data are broken down into categories based on specific words, phrases, and paragraphs (Ngulube, 2015) for each case. The coding of the data were done by the researcher through the software program. Appendix D provides some examples of how the data were coded through QDA Miner Lite, where initial themes were identified.

According to Creswell (2013), the third step in the process was to identify major themes and reasoning from participants and organize the data. The researcher clustered these statements into meaningful themes in order to use the data to answer the research questions by identifying, evaluating, and reporting occurring themes from the transcripts (Jugder, 2016). The researcher identified statements expressed by the participants from each case which spoke directly to the reason they made specific decisions regarding internet marketing based on the defined categories. Significant statements were pulled from each case spreadsheet based on category and compiled into one spreadsheet for comparison. These statements were grouped with similar statements across all cases to develop the identified themes. Themes emerged as the researcher grouped significant statements together across the multiple cases. Yin (2014) then recommended synthesizing the themes into categories and assigning descriptive words to each segment of the experiences of the participants in the fourth step. The researcher compared themes across participants to gain an understanding and link decision-making processes related to internet marketing to small business owner's perceptions.

Finally, according to Creswell's (2013) final step, the researcher used a narrative to present a detailed illustration of the findings. The major themes were compared across all small business owners to generalize the findings between rural small businesses. According to Creswell (2013), data analysis often occurs concurrently as data are collected.

### **Reliability and Validity**

According to Yin (2014), it is imperative to address both reliability and validity in qualitative researcher. Reliability demonstrates the approach used by the researcher is consistent if the results are the same should a different researcher using the same method conduct the study, and validity occurs when the researcher seeks to show there is accuracy of the findings (Gibbs,

2007; Yin, 2014). Reliability and validity are both ways to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the findings from the study and a thorough research process (Leung, 2015).

### ***Reliability***

As previously mentioned, reliability is determined by its consistency and trustworthiness. According to Lietz et al. (2006), the following components are needed for a study to be considered trustworthy: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher used semi-structured interviews in this qualitative study to enhance reliability. The researcher used an interview guide and a consistent interview process to understand the decision making processes of the respondents regarding internet marketing from their business perspective (Singer & Couper, 2017). Using interviews helped the researcher understand the respondents thought processes and differentiate between the perceptions of multiple rural small business owners from Sumter and Marengo Counties in Alabama (Bridge, 2017). The interview guide developed by the researcher consisted of open-ended questions, which allowed the respondents to respond freely and helped the researcher gain an understanding of their experiences. According to Singer and Couper (2017), using open-ended interview questions increase reliability because participants are allowed to describe their experiences and perspectives about internet marketing without being limited by the researcher and researcher biases. The researcher used member checking to enhance reliability in the study. The researcher gave the participants an opportunity to review the information transcribed from the transcripts and interpretations from the notes to check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Creswell and Poth (2017) suggested that member checking should be used to enhance the reliability and credibility of the data. Gaining insights from key stakeholders in the analysis process also helps with the reliability of the study and credibility of the findings (Lietz et al., 2006).

### ***Validity***

Triangulation, explanation of researcher bias, and data saturation will help enhance the validity of this qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher used triangulation to establish themes from the data from the various respondent's viewpoints to build a coherent justification for themes from the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher also informed respondents of the researcher's knowledge and background in working with small business owners to indicate any bias potentially brought to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher used reflexive journaling during the study. Revealing personal biases in a written journal helped the researcher discover and understand the lived experiences of the rural small business owners from their perspective, and not allow bias to overshadow the data analysis process (Stake, 2010). The researcher interviewed participants until data saturation was reached. Data saturation occurs when no new consistent data were revealed from additional interviews with rural small business owners (Stake, 2010). According to Denzin (2009), the richness and depth of the data are more important than the quantity. It is important to note that triangulation and data saturation have a direct link since triangulation is a method to reach data saturation (Denzin, 2009).

### **Transition and Summary of Section 2**

The researcher provided, in Section 2, a review of the purpose statement to remind the reader why understanding the issue is a relevant issue to address. The researcher also discussed the central role of the researcher and the participants from whom data were collected, as well as the research method and design. The population targeted and selection of the sample and its appropriateness for the study were also discussed. The researcher also discussed the data collection process, including the data collection instruments, data collection techniques, and data

organization techniques. Finally, the researcher discussed the data analysis techniques and reliability and validity issues.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate how rural small business owner's experiences related to decision making affect their decision to use or not to use internet marketing as a strategy. To this end, the researcher explored the factors that influence rural small business owner's lack of adoption of internet marketing by interviewing eight rural small business owners located in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. The researcher developed an interview guide containing 18 semi-structured questions that guided the participants in responding to questions relating to internet marketing and marketing strategies. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Written notes were paired with the transcriptions to organize the data for analysis. The researcher ensured security and confidentiality by using codes for participants as well as a two-step verification method to keep data secured on the laptop. The laptop used to store the data was password-protected, and the primary file which contained the audio and written files, also required a password to access the data. The researcher also used several strategies to ensure reliability and validity.

In Section 3, the researcher presents the findings from the study and how the findings will be applied in professional practice. Also, the researcher provides recommendations for action and recommendations for further study, based on the findings, to enhance the area of factors that influence rural small business owners not to use internet marketing as a strategy.

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

Section 3 reviews the research of eight small business owners and the factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a marketing strategy. This section will begin with an overview of the study, followed by the anticipated themes and presentation of the findings. The researcher will discuss the relationship of the themes to the stated research questions and include an overall summary of the findings. The researcher will also discuss the applications to professional practice, recommendations for actions along with recommendations for further study. Finally, the researcher will conclude with reflections and overall summary and conclusion of the study.

#### **Overview of the Study**

This qualitative case study was designed to explore how rural small business owners make decisions about using internet marketing as a marketing strategy. To understand the small business owner's experiences, the researcher designed the study to uncover relevant factors that influence the business owner's decision-making process not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a marketing strategy. Small business owners who do not use internet marketing fail to put their products and services in a channel where a large portion of consumers are making purchases (Isoraite, 2017). Internet marketing can profoundly affect rural small businesses in terms of revenue generation and customer traffic.

The general problem to be addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by small business owners. Small business owners who fail to use internet marketing as a strategy may lose customer traffic, visibility, and revenues, which are essential for sustainability. Alford and Page (2015) stated despite the importance, significance, and substantial benefits of internet marketing, the majority of small and medium-sized businesses who adopt internet-based technologies for

marketing is limited. The specific problem to be addressed is the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners within the southeastern United States, resulting in a loss of customer traffic and revenues.

The primary research question that guided this qualitative study was: Why do rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing to market their products and services? Two additional specific research questions supported the main research question. These questions were:

RQ1a. To what extent do rural small business owners understand how their failure to use internet marketing affect their business?

RQ1b. What are the key factors, and to what extent do they influence rural small business owner's decision-making process in implementing internet marketing strategies?

These questions were designed to reveal the understanding of why business owners fail to use internet marketing to illustrate the breadth of awareness business owners have regarding the impacts of internet marketing on their business, and to uncover the specific factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing.

The above-referenced research questions were answered using the information collected from rural small business owners located in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. The researcher selected participants for the study based on the U.S. Small Business Administration definition of small business, a for-profit business with fewer than 500 employees, and generates less than \$500,000 in revenues (SBA, 2016). In this study, a small business referred to businesses that operate with a maximum of 15 employees. Participants were also selected based on their geographic location and lack of use of internet marketing. Participants were identified through contacts from the Center for Business and Entrepreneurial Services (CBES) and the

Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at The University of West Alabama in Livingston, AL, through a recruitment email (Appendix A). The researcher obtained contact information for potential participants who met the study requirements and then contacted the participants to elicit participation in the study. The researcher interviewed eight rural small business owners located in either Sumter or Marengo counties in Alabama. Rural small business owners had to meet the following criteria to participate:

1. Own a rural small business in Sumter or Marengo County, AL.
2. Were over the age of 18.
3. The small business had less than 15 employees and generated less than \$500,000 in revenues annually.
4. Did not use internet marketing to market their small business or have some experience with internet marketing but do not effectively use internet marketing to market their small business.
5. Make the decisions related to marketing for their small business.

### ***Participant Demographics***

The demographic information gathered included: industry, age, gender, ethnicity, education level, geographic location, and annual business income. Based on the data collected, the following were concluded about the study population (See Table 1):

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Code	Industry	Age Range	Gender	Ethnicity	Educational Level	Geographic Location	Business Annual Income Range
RB1	Heavy Equipment	30-39	F	Caucasian	Doctorate	Sumter	\$150,001-\$200,000
RB2	Healthcare	60-79	F	Black/AA	Master's	Marengo	\$100,000-150,000
RB3	Real Estate	40-49	F	Black/AA	Doctorate	Sumter	\$50,001-\$100,000
RB4	Retail	30-39	M	Black/AA	Associates	Marengo	\$0-\$50,000
RB5	Service	50-59	M	Black/AA	Bachelor's	Sumter	\$0-\$50,000
RB6	Service	18-29	M	Black/AA	High School	Marengo	\$0-\$50,000
RB7	Real Estate	60-69	F	Caucasian	Master's	Sumter	\$150,001-\$200,000
RB8	Retail	60-69	M	Caucasian	Bachelor's	Sumter	\$50,001-\$100,000

RB1 was a business whose owners operate in the resell of heavy equipment industry. The owners are a Caucasian female and male, ranging between the ages of 30 and 39, and hold doctoral degrees. The business has operated in Sumter County, AL, for 12 years. The annual business income ranges between \$150,001 and \$200,000. The owners started the company as a hobby since they both grew up on farms in Sumter County. The more involved they became in the business, the more they realized they might want to make this their full-time jobs one day. Both owners currently have full-time employment outside of their family business. The owners now use Tractor House magazine, which is printed weekly and a Facebook page to market their products and services. The owners do not have a website, and the Facebook page is not used effectively and is updated only when new inventory is available. Non-available inventory is not removed in hopes to archive the inventory history, which creates challenges for customers who

are calling with interests for items no longer available. The customer base consists of hobby farmers and lifelong farmers in a five-county area.

RB2 was a business whose owners operate in the healthcare and education industry. The owners are African American females, ranging between the ages of 60 and 79, and hold Master's degrees. The business has operated in Marengo County, AL, for 23 years. The annual business income ranges between \$100,000 and \$150,000. The owners started the business to support those needing adult care services while their loved ones worked. The initial owner retired from the military and started this business as a way to give back. One owner is primarily responsible for marketing currently has full-time employment outside of the family business. The owners now have their information on state websites as listing and a Facebook page to market their services. The owners do not have a website they manage, and the Facebook page is not used effectively and is updated only when there is a fundraiser for the Center. It is difficult for them to attract followers for this page since the content is not updated regularly. The customer base consists of adults with mental health challenges or physical disabilities and requires 24-hour care. Most clients are referred to the Center from state programs.

RB3 was a business whose owner operates in the real estate industry. The owner is an African American female who falls within the 40-49 age range and holds a doctoral degree. The business has operated in Sumter County, AL, for six years. The annual business income ranges between \$50,000 and \$100,000. The owners started the company as a hobby since she was interested in flipping houses in Sumter County. She quickly realized the need for rental properties in her community and began to purchase and remodel new houses. She currently has full-time employment outside of this business. The owner now uses her personal Facebook page for marketing her properties when they are available. The owner does not have a website, and the

Facebook page is not used effectively and is updated only when inventory is available. Non-available inventory is removed, which creates a challenge for her and a time deficit because she has to start from scratch each time she adds a new or existing property. The customer base consists of residents looking for a house rental or individuals moving to the area.

RB4 was a business whose owner operates in the retail industry. The owner is an African American male who falls within the 30-39 age range and holds an Associate's degree. The business has operated in Marengo County, AL, for four years. The annual business income ranges between \$0 and \$50,000. The owner started the company after customers began asking where he purchased clothing items he wore or decorative wood pieces that he used in and around his home. He realized this was a business opportunity and started the business in his home shop. He currently had full-time employment outside of this business until he was laid off due to a COVID-19 shutdown. The owner has two separate Facebook pages for marketing his products. One page is dedicated to wood-working and crafts, while the other is dedicated to apparel. The owner does not have a website, and the Facebook page is not used effectively and is only updated when an order is received for an item. He is depending on word of mouth advertising a great deal for his business. The customer base consists of residents within his county and two surrounding counties.

RB5 was a business whose owner operates in the service industry. The owner is an African American male who falls within the 50-59 age range and holds a Bachelor's degree. The business has operated in Sumter County, AL, for 10 years. The annual business income ranges between \$0 and \$50,000. The owner started the company after he noticed catering orders were increasing from family and friends and those they referred to him. He currently has full-time employment outside of his business. The owner presently markets his services on his personal

Facebook page. The owner does not have a website, and he typically only post pictures after he has an event. He depends on word of mouth advertising for his business. The customer base consists of individuals, families, and small organizations.

RB6 was a business whose owner operates in the service industry. The owner is an African American male who falls within the 18-29 age range and holds a high school diploma. The business has operated in Marengo County, AL, for seven years. The annual business income ranges between \$0 and \$50,000. The owner started the company after the yard service company he was working with decided to close their business. He was able to keep some of the accounts but had to build his customer base. He currently has full-time employment outside of his business and does not have additional employees. The owner presently markets his services on his business Facebook page, which has not been updated in three months. The owner does not have a website, and he posts before and after photos if he remembers. He depends on word of mouth advertising and t-shirts marketing for his business. The customer base consists of individuals, HOAs within subdivisions, and one corporate account.

RB7 was a business whose owner operates in the real estate industry. The owner is a Caucasian female who falls within the 60-69 age range and holds a Master's degree. The business has operated in Sumter County, AL, for 32 years. The annual business income ranges between \$150,000 and \$200,000. The owner started the company so that she could work from home while her children were small. She has since rented an office space from which she operates the business. She currently has part-time employment outside of this business and works with her daughter to market the business. The owner presently markets her products via her daughter's personal Facebook page. Her daughter also lists the postings in a Buy and Sell Facebook group. She depends on word of mouth advertising and Facebook posts for her

business. The customer base consists of individuals moving into the area and college students who are looking for rentals.

RB8 was a business whose owner operates in the retail industry. The owner is a Caucasian male who falls within the 60-69 age range and holds a Bachelor's degree. The business has operated in Sumter County, AL, for three years. The annual business income ranges between \$50,001 and \$100,000. The owner started the company after he retired from a 26-year position at a university. He wanted to provide a rural area with specialty foods and items not easy to get. He currently does not have employment outside of his business. The owner presently markets his products through a business Facebook page his employees maintain. He depends on word of mouth advertising and Facebook posts to market his business. The customer base consists of individuals living in the community and visitors to the community.

The researcher administered semi-structured interviews with the eight participants. The semi-structured interview scheduled included 18 questions. The interviews were audio-recorded to assist in the transcription and analysis of data. The researcher assigned a code to each business in the order in which they were interviewed. The first business was coded RB1, the second business was coded RB2, and the code number increased progressively to 8, while the prefix (RB) remained the same. The researcher used QDA Miner Lite to help perform the analysis of the transcripts. During the analysis, the transcripts were coded for the six themes previously identified to include: time constraints, capital and human resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and social media comprehension.

Different questions were included in the interview schedule to answer specific research questions. Of the 18 questions, nine of them were designed to answer the first research question. The primary research question sought to reveal the essence of the lack of internet marketing used

by rural small business owners. This question also sought to understand the rural small business owner's knowledge level, comfort level, and use of the internet in general and specifically for their small business. Five questions were designed to explore the breadth of awareness the rural small business owners have regarding the impacts of internet marketing on their business. Four questions were designed to uncover the specific factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a strategy. The data collection instrument also contained five additional questions to collect demographic and geographic information.

Responses showed all business owners interviewed are the primary decision-makers for their small businesses' marketing and the majority of business owners use the internet in general on a day-to-day basis. Still, only half use the internet specifically to support their small business operation on a day to day basis. The results also showed half of small business owners were comfortable using the internet in general and using Facebook to help market their small business, but not websites or other social media platforms. Further, the results showed none have websites, and only half use Facebook as a marketing tool.

The second set of interview questions addressed the breadth of awareness the rural small business owners have regarding the impacts of internet marketing on their business. The responses revealed a majority of the participants had minimal knowledge of specific tools (e.g., constant contact, Mailchimp, Benchmark, etc.) that could help them market their small business in an automated fashion. Responses also demonstrated all participants understood the various benefits and the value internet marketing could bring to their small businesses, specifically in terms of visibility, customer traffic, and an increase in revenues. Of the participants, more than half realized their businesses are not as visible as they would like for it to be. All of the

participants also responded in some form their decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing impacts their customer experience, sales volume, and customer satisfaction related explicitly to response times, scheduling appointments, and view available inventory.

The final set of interview questions sought to uncover the specific factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a strategy. The participants' responses revealed none of the small businesses follow a specific decision-making process when deciding how to market their business. The responses also demonstrated the primary reasons and major factors affecting a small business owner's failure to use internet marketing were time constraints, capital, and human resources, geographic location, age, and reliable internet service. Of the owners interviewed, half responded age was a primary factor, more than half responded knowledge of internet marketing and social media sites were a factor, all responded time was a serious factor, all responded reliable internet was a factor, and more than half responded their geographic location was a factor.

### **Anticipated Themes/Perceptions**

Before beginning the data collection, the researcher expected to hear specific themes during the interviews. These anticipated themes were derived from real-life experiences, extensive research, and articles reviewed during the literature review. The researcher anticipated hearing the business owners had little to no knowledge of internet marketing and how to utilize it in their businesses. Additionally, there was an anticipation of rural small business owners' time being a significant factor in not using internet marketing. The researcher also anticipated that due to the limited resources available in rural areas, the geographic location and access to broadband would also be factors. Finally, the researcher expected the age of some rural small business owners might play a significant role as to why they fail to use internet marketing.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

This section will address data saturation, triangulation, and the themes identified from the analysis. Data saturation occurs when no new data are revealed from additional interviews with participants (Stake, 2010). In this study, the researcher interviewed eight rural small business owners in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. After eight interviews, the data collected yielded similar and consistent results. As a result, the researcher was confident data saturation was achieved when considering rural small businesses in the retail and service industries in the counties mentioned above. Triangulation is defined as the process by which the researcher examines multiple sources to build coherent justification for themes or perspectives from various respondent's viewpoints (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher began to gather themes across each rural small business once the data were analyzed, which added validity to the study. The convergence of the six consistent and recurring themes identified is evidence of triangulation. In this study, the researcher identified six themes seen across rural small businesses.

### **Theme 1: Time Constraints**

Many small business owners expressed time constraint was a major contributing factor to their failure not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing. Time constraints related directly to (a) general time constraints, (b) time constraints due to other employment, and (c) family influences on time spent in the business. Time constraints contribute to most of the owner's failure to engage with potential customers on social media fully, create timely content, and manage online relationships. The finding is consistent with results from previous studies on small business owners' time constraints with using internet marketing. Karimi and Naghibi (2015) argued that small business owners suffer from time and capital resources needed to fully

implement internet marketing strategies via social media. Similarly, additional researchers (Alford & Page, 2015; Soltani et al., 2015) affirmed the adoption of technology as a marketing tool depends on various resources, which include monetary and time. According to Ramayah et al. (2016), one primary reason for a small business owner's reluctance to implement technology in marketing is the limitation of the available resources and time. Thus, time constraint is one of the key factors that emerged from the present research.

### ***General***

The lack of time to work on marketing for their business, internet marketing or otherwise, weighed heavily on participants and was something they wished they could change. Participants displayed a keen awareness of what needed to be done in their businesses in terms of marketing, but time was a major issue in overcoming this barrier. The finding is consistent with results from previous studies on social media marketing in businesses. Shaltoni (2017) argued that social media pages are easy to manage, but requires time to manage in order to reap the benefits sought. Time, money, and other resources are required to focus on implementing any social media marketing campaign (Harrigan & Miles, 2014). One participant stated, "I haven't considered anything other than Facebook, because I don't know how much time I would have to really learn something new, I just don't have enough time to do everything I want to do for my business" (RB5, July 7, 2020). Many participants held similar sentiments regarding time. "The time I have to devote to marketing is very limited" (RB1, June 19, 2020). "You have to find ways to save time when working your business. I just don't have enough time to do everything I need to do for the business" (RB5, July 7, 2020). "If I had one wish, it would be for more time to learn how to use social media and stuff on the internet to promote my business" (RB3, June 30, 2020). "My business requires a lot of travel and that eats up a lot of time, time from learning something new,

time from actually marketing the business, time from working on the business, you know, just a lot of things” (RB5, July 7, 2020).

So, you know, when I did post to my personal page, I felt like I was being ambushed with it. So you know what I learned from that specifically is that you have to have to time to dedicate to responding to people after making the post. If you're going to use those platforms you need some type of system in place to handle the amount of messages you get and the time to carve out to make sure you respond so people don't feel ignored, especially as you grow. (RB3, June 30, 2020)

Every time I take on a new project, I'm always looking to do a little bit better than what I did the last time. So the additional upgrades that I can add, things that the customers want is important, but when you're tight on time, you've got to do what you know. (RB4, June 30, 2020)

Todor (2016) posited the use of digital media and internet marketing strategies can take some time to learn and obtain success. As the participants stated, time was seen as a barrier to marketing and they were aware that a time deficit could lead to low visibility and low revenues for their business. This finding aligns with previous studies. Fiore et al. (2013) posited small business owners often face difficulties with marketing activities in general, but even more so with internet marketing, which can lead to low earning potential and low visibility. Many small business owners expressed sentiments of needing more time to do what they know they should be doing to help grow their small businesses.

### ***Other Employment***

Participants repeatedly discussed that having to work full-time or part-time jobs outside of the business puts a strain on how much time they can dedicate to maintaining and growing a

small business. The finding is supported by previous studies on challenges faced by small and medium sized businesses. Petkovic et al. (2016) found some business owners maintain other employment during the early or growth stages of business development to generate additional capital needed for the business. One business owner said, “When you and your husband work full time, you’ve got to pick and choose what you do for your business and how you do it and marketing falls by the wayside” (RB1, June 19, 2020). Another participant said, “I have two other jobs besides this business, you know for insurance and my business really depends on the weather, whether I am able to work or not” (RB6, July 7, 2020). Still, another participant said,

However, I had other employment, which meant my involvement basically was doing the accounting work and keeping things on tracks. I joined the company more on a full-time basis in the last four years; however, I still have full time outside of work. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

Many business owners also expressed their desire to have their business be their primary jobs. Because of the desire to have more time to devote to the business and make this their only employment, RB1 discussed the idea of growing the business to a point where the husband could quit his current job:

I know I feel certain that doing this full time is his goal in life, you know, at some point, be able to work for himself and this be his livelihood. He's probably getting a little closer than he ever has been in the last two years. But yeah, we definitely need more time for marketing the business, starting a website, and making sure we can manage everything. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

It was evident by RB1's statement they feel if they had the additional time to devote to internet marketing and marketing in general, they could realize this dream. This sentiment was shared with other business owners as one participant stated,

I would love for my mom to be able to retire and for this to be my fulltime job, however, I would need to quit my current job. Before I could do that, I would need the time to really market the Center and get the finances where we need them to be. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

Still, another participant stated,

You know when you start a business, or anyone starts a business, you would hope you can retire from that business, but you've got to have the time to devote to that business and that business only to really make it work. (RB6, July 7, 2020)

Several participants expressed a desire to serve more customers, but feared that marketing too much could hinder their ability to meet their needs due to their time constraints. One participant stated, "Time and personnel are a problem; it is just my mother and I that run the business" (RB2, June 23, 2020). Another participant said that "It would be great to do this full time, but if we get too big, we won't be able to serve all of the customers" (RB1, June 19, 2020). Time was a significant factor revealed in the interviewees. Other participants held similar sentiments and stated:

I could certainly use the internet to take orders, but along with the weather issues, I have to worry about the time issues. I usually fill most of my orders after work since most of my customers need their orders for the weekends. Sometimes I get orders less than a week before they need the items. If I have too many customers like that, I won't be able

to fill all of the orders because I won't have time. I can't take off work to do this. (RB4, June 30, 2020)

In the lawn care service, you really have to be careful about how many jobs you commit to when you don't have a lot of help. I really have too many now with the time that I have. I'm working every day the weather lets me and if I just put my services on the internet or Facebook, I might have to start turning people away, and that's bad for business. (RB6, July 7, 2020)

### ***Family Influence***

Several participants expressed their time to work on their business or to really engage in social media or internet marketing is also limited due to family influences. This finding is supported by previous studies on social support for entrepreneurs. Molino et al. (2018) found entrepreneurs are often influenced by family and friends when making business decisions. Family support is critical during the start-up and growth face of business development and the role family and friends play in provided support or perceived support can contribute significantly to entrepreneurial success (Molino et al., 2018). Researchers have also found the role of the family in an entrepreneurial venture must be explicit and transparent in order to maintain the level of support needed to be successful in operating the business (Cardella et al., 2020). One business owner said,

I would love to get home and eat and spend the next five to six hours posting on social media or learning to build a website, but we have a son and we must dedicate most of our time to him and other stuff around the house in the evenings, and weekends for that matter. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

Another participant said,

I'm also spread real thin, because my parents own a grocery store in the Mississippi and since I'm the one that's not married or don't have kids, they expect me to really come and help on the weekends. I also help them manage the money part of their business. That means I'm not putting that time in my business and that's another reason. (RB3, June 30, 2020)

Still, another participant said,

You know the old saying, happy wife happy life right. Well when I've worked all day at job 1 and then spend the evening into the night trying to finish up yards, she's not happy. That means all my time needs to be doing the job, so I guess you can say that I'm working in the business more than I am working on the business. (RB6, July 7, 2020)

McMullen and Kier (2016) found entrepreneurs are often faced with many decisions on where to allocate their time, energy, and resources and family time remains a priority for most owners. Some business owners also expressed their desire to have time to spend with their loved ones. In order to do that, they felt they needed to focus on what was bringing in the money, which is the actual selling of the products or providing the service. RB7 discussed the idea by stating:

I know that it is important to learn how to market on websites and Facebook, but it's also important that I have time to spend with my grandchildren, and time to spend with my husband. I can sign up for a class and then spend the next three days trying to do what they taught me, but look at how much time I'm losing with my family. I just depend on my daughter to do that stuff so I don't waste a bunch a time on something that could take her two minutes. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

It was evident by RB7's statement that she wanted to use her extra time to spend with family rather than learning a new skill that may help her grow the business. This sentiment was shared with other business owners, one of whom stated:

Everybody always gives you lots of advice on what you can do to grow your business and make lots of money, but it's about the people and the relationships. I can't spend all of my time learning how to use Facebook. My family wouldn't like that very much anyway since I'd be doing that for eight hours a day. (RB8, July 10, 2020)

## **Theme 2: Capital and Human Resource Capacity**

Participants discussed the challenges they face in terms of capital and personnel when deciding how to market their business. Participant's overwhelmingly responded consistently that money and personnel were the top two specific things that hinder their use of internet marketing. The finding is consistent with previous research on challenges faced by small and medium sized enterprises. Richmond et al. (2017) found rural small businesses are not using internet-based technology to market their businesses through websites, e-commerce, or social media due to limited capital and personnel.

### ***Capital Resources***

Capital in terms of money or funding and the lack of funds the business has along with the lack of funding available for rural small businesses was a significant factor. The finding was supported by previous researchers studying challenges faced by small business owners. Mohan and Ali (2019) stated there are many challenges small businesses face when adopting internet marketing (e.g., knowledge, talent, and funding). One participant said, "Time and money are big issues for us, we are always in need of donors or grant opportunities" (RB2, June 23, 2020). Other participants held similar sentiments regarding money,

But as far as capital, you know, it's hard to find small business loans. There's not a lot of small businesses out there that have the capital to really support their business like they need to. I need capital to purchase more equipment and to really ramp up the business promotions. (RB4, June 30, 2020)

Participants repeatedly discussed that additional funds could help them grow them in the area of marketing.

As my business is growing, I would love to be able to take out an ad in the paper or to pay for radio spots to make sure travelers know what we have to offer since we're off the beaten path. In order for me to do that, I need to know that I am making enough money to keep that up. I don't want to get a loan or anything, maybe if there were some little grants for businesses like my unique business that would help. (RB8, July 10, 2020)

"The top three things for me would be time, money, and training" (RB3, June 30, 2020).

I think capital would be the biggest thing in my business and industry. When you are providing catering services, you typically only get half the money up front, and when you're traveling or trying to hire help for the day, you need to already have that money in place. You also have to spend a lot of money up front on equipment and supplies and that doesn't leave a lot of money for marketing, boosting post, and all the other things you can do on social media. You have to build up your funds first. (RB5, July 7, 2020)

You know you can do a lot of things if you had all the money in the world for your business, but our business is a little different. Our fees for service is not large and the state doesn't pay very much, and we depend on grants and donors like I said. I'd love to have money to help market the business. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

It was evident by these statements participants feel if they had the additional revenues to help with marketing and in the business in general, they could possibly implement some form of internet marketing. Alonso and Bressan (2016) found rural small businesses are limited by their available resources and how they allocate the few resources available to them. These resources include capital, personnel, infrastructure, and knowledge (Alonso & Bressan, 2016; Davcik & Sharma, 2016). Several participants also expressed the desire to have money to hire personnel to help in the area of marketing. One participant stated, “I’d love to have money to be able to take classes on social media or to hire someone to help with marketing” (RB2, June 23, 2020). RB1 discussed:

With Tractor House magazine you give the rep the information you need to include in the mail catalogue, but then she takes that same information and include it on their website. It would be great to be able to do that with our own website if we could hire someone to manage it and then that information would be linked to all the different social media accounts. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

### ***Human Resource Capacity***

Participants overwhelmingly discussed the need for additional personnel and named it as a factor for not engaging in or effectively using internet marketing. Participants repeatedly discussed having someone in the business to set up and manage the internet marketing component would help since their knowledge is very limited in the area. This finding aligns with a study by Harrigan and Miles (2014) which shows small business owners could use assistance and support from experts who are well-versed in social media platforms. One business owner said,

I've got someone who is trying to walk me through a website template to building a website, but it is a slow process. I just don't know how these things work and if we had employees this could be given to them. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

Another participant said, "Having someone to manage this [social media marketing] would be really good, but I'm the only person working in the business" (RB3, June 30, 2020). Still, another participant said, "I would hire someone full time if I could, that's how I could solve this problem" (RB2, June 23, 2020). Other participants echoed these sentiments by saying:

In my business you can use all the help you can get. If I had someone to help just on a part-time basis with managing social media accounts after the events to make sure I got the word out, that would help. (RB5, July 7, 2020)

Hiring someone to help me manage the bookkeeping, marketing, and customer invoices would really be a help, but you really need to bring in a steady income year round for that. My business in the winter is really iffy and if I had a reserve I could do that. (RB6, July 7, 2020)

I wish my family was as excited about this business as I am so that they could help me in the business. I have one other person that works for me, but she doesn't know how to do social media all that. (RB8, July 10, 2020)

It was evident from the statements that participants felt working capital is a necessity in any business, but even more so for small rural businesses. This finding is aligned with a study by Phillip and Williams (2019) who posited most rural small business owners do not have enough capital or expertise to fully launch an internet marketing campaign, and this problem is compounded due to the digital inequalities that exist in rural communities. Capital and human resources were identified as significant contributing factors across the interviews and participants

expressed having access to a good amount of working capital would allow them to not only market their business better, but hire additional help to ensure the internet marketing piece is being done effectively.

### **Theme 3: Geographic Location**

Many small business owners expressed where they are located, rural West Alabama, was also a contributing factor to their failure not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing. Many participants stated a belief it would be much easier if they were located in a more urban area to use internet marketing due to the customers they serve. The finding is consistent with literature related to rural small firms' use of internet. Galloway et al. (2011) posited that small businesses are more likely to use internet marketing in rural areas if their customer base uses technology regularly. On the other hand, small businesses are less likely to use internet marketing if their customer base does not traditionally use the internet or social media to aid in purchases. Understanding your customers and how they wish to interact with your business is key to knowing how to market to a specific customer base (Lekhanya, 2015). In speaking about their geographic location, participants discussed the availability of reliable internet, the amount of customer traffic, and the marketing channels used by their current customer base.

One participant said "Marketing is different for us here, if we were in a bigger city, it would be so much easier to market to customers on the internet" (RB4, June 20, 2020). Other participants held similar sentiments regarding location, "Our location definitely affects our ability because we don't have as many towers for internet service" (RB8, July 10, 2020). Still, other participants also expressed similar sentiments. "With us being in a rural area and all, it's just not that easy to find help when you want help marketing online. Most of those types of folks are in the bigger towns" (RB7, July 10, 2020).

Of course our location plays a big role in how we market our products and services to people. In one way I feel that we are in a unique position, if you can get enough word of mouth or a website that tells people where you are and what you have, like a hidden gem, you'll be surprised how much traffic you may get. Let's face it, we're not the most popular tourist attraction. (RB8, July 10, 2020)

The first rule of business is location, location, location right. I mean the community we serve are not necessarily tech savvy and the population is not very large, which both impact how much business you can do and how you tell them about your business. (RB5, July 7, 2020)

Participants repeatedly discussed people who do business in rural communities like to know the people they are working with and are not as comfortable doing business over the internet. Galloway et al.'s (2011) findings align with this statement and posited in rural communities, small businesses thrive on the relationships they are able to build with their customers. One business owner said, "When you're in rural Alabama where a lot of our customers are, they want to come and see what you got. They don't just want to see it on the internet" (RB8, July 10, 2020). Other participants shared these same sentiments.

In the rural area we're in, you need to market to people how they can get your information. Sometimes in North Sumter, they don't even have internet. That really hurts us because most of those folks farm and they are our customers. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

"Rural areas are always disadvantaged because they don't think we can market online. A lot of people just like to deal with people and not computers; it's about relationships" (RB6, July 7, 2020).

It was evident by these statements that participants felt their geographic location hinders their ability to fully engage in internet marketing.

#### **Theme 4: Limitations Due to Age**

Several participants expressed concerns about their age being a contributing factor as to why they are not using internet marketing. These factors were expressed in terms of the learning curve and generational differences. Most participants agreed it would take them much longer to learn how to use the internet or social media sites than they were willing to devote to the learning. Small business owners must devote a significant amount of time to learn the technical tools used for digital marketing creation and maintenance (Ritz et al., 2018). Participants also expressed that generational difference with themselves and their customers influenced their decisions. Marketing to different generations is very important for all business to understand and even more important for rural small businesses (Williams & Page, 2011).

#### ***Learning Curve***

Several participants expressed their concerns with the amount of time it would take them to learn how to use social media site and internet tools and expressed this is time they could be spending working in their business. This finding is supported by previous studies on digital marketing challenges for small businesses. Ritz et al. (2018) posited that acquiring the knowledge and expertise necessary to engage in digital marketing is a significant challenge for small business owners. Lacka and Chong's (2016) findings also support this theme and stated the use of technology itself is less of a deterrent to using internet marketing as knowing which sites to use and how to use them. One participant said, "I really have to depend on my daughter a lot just to post stuff on Facebook and stuff. I'm too old to keep up with that and all the other stuff these kids are using" (RB7, July 10, 2020). Participants repeatedly discussed social media and

internet marketing changes quickly, and by the time they learn it, there is something new to learn.

Well, I hate to say my age, but it's true, I feel like I'm behind the curve and I'm not as young as some people doing what I do in real estate and I just don't know how to use the tools that are out there. (RB3, June 30, 2020)

"Everything on the internet changes so fast, you've got to be able to keep up and at my age, I need to just hire someone to do that" (RB8, July 10, 2020). "With the time it would take me to learn how to do this, I could be spending that time with my grandchildren" (RB7, July 10, 2020). "I don't even have time to take a course to help me learn to use social media or make a website and it would definitely take a course instead of a crash course" (RB3, June 30, 2020).

We are much older than most, and trying to learn a new craft at this age is next to impossible for my mother, and I'm not sure that I want to. I would need a whole class to learn how to do this right. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

It was evident by these statements that several participants felt the learning curve would be too long for them to help grow their business. This was further evident because none of these specific business owners expressed a desire or willingness to learn to use these tools.

### ***Generational Differences***

Participants also expressed when they started their business, business was not conducted on the internet. It was more personal and internet marketing is more for the current generation of business owners. The difference between generations and the way they interact with the internet was an important point that participants expressed. This finding aligns with previous studies conducted on marketing to different generations. Williams and Page (2011) posited that small business owners should adapt their marketing strategies based on the generation of the

consumers. Marketing to pre-depression, depression, baby boomers, generation x, generation y, and generation z require different marketing strategies that business owners should become well-versed in pending the nature of their business (Williams & Page, 2011). Participants provided discussion from the generational perspective of themselves and their customers. One participant said,

We are not the ideal age either to be using the internet to help grow our business. We didn't grow up doing things this way. When my mother started the business, it was all word of mouth and flyers, and of course the state referrals. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

The same participant expressed, "When you are 60 plus and your mother is 80 plus and trying to phase out of the business, this really doesn't help our case to start websites and use social media" (RB2, June 23, 2020). Other participants expressed they are not as knowledgeable about internet marketing and social media tools that could help them learn to market on the internet.

"When you talk about Twitter, Blogs, and that other stuff, I don't even know what it is and how to start thinking about using that, that wasn't around when we started doing business" (RB7, July 10, 2020). "I try and post something and sometimes I have a hard time trying to take it down when it's gone so people get frustrated when they call and ask about. They say stuff like, it's still on Facebook" (RB5, July 7, 2020). "I would just say for me it is knowing how to use websites, and so what's out there besides the social media stuff that could help me get my services on the internet" (RB8, July 10, 2020). "I'd say, time, money, and just limited experience with websites and the programs and what is now available" (RB2, June 23, 2020).

RB1 discussed the generational difference in their customers influence their decisions about internet marketing. She expressed they must also think about their customers when they think about how to market their products.

We also have to think about our customers. Most of our customers are from the older generation of farming and you better believe they are going to faithfully get their Tractor House magazine, but they are not going to be on Facebook checking to see where they find the latest tractor. These are very big purchases and they are the type of men who like to come and see and feel and once they trust you they will be back for business. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

### **Theme 5: Reliable Internet Service**

Participants overwhelming responded that reliable internet service was a significant factor that hindered their ability to use internet marketing tools for marketing their business. In terms of reliable internet service, participants discussed service providers, internet speed, and environmental factors. The finding was supported by previous research on how access to broadband impacts businesses. Mack (2014) found despite the widespread attention broadband and its impacts is given, broadband is needed to ensure businesses can operate efficiently in rural locations.

#### ***Service Providers***

Participants shared that service provider options were limited, which also provides limited network options. McCoy et al. (2018) supported this finding and posited that developing meaningful and accurate broadband availability and infrastructure in rural areas is difficult for most communities. RB2 said,

There is very poor internet at the Center where our business operates, and we need more towers in the area that would help some. There is only one internet provider here, so no matter how good or bad it is, you don't have a choice. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

Other participants shared these same sentiments. "We need more options for carriers because the ones we have they don't care about us and they don't have enough towers" (RB6, July 7, 2020). "All we have is one option [for internet provider]. You can't even get anybody else and their internet is not that great. I don't know anybody that is just pleased with their service" (RB4, June 30, 2020).

The only internet I have at home is a hot spot because you just can't get internet service out here, and when you're a home-based business, you need good internet. I have to stay late at work or go early just to have decent internet to do some things I need to. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

"I use Mediacom Cable Company and have the bundle deal, but the internet is not like the internet I can get when I come to work. It's not nearly as fast" (RB5, July 7, 2020).

### ***Data Speed***

Participants also repeatedly shared the limited number of towers and data speed options affect their ability to have reliable internet service. Rampersad and Troshani (2020) found small businesses are limited in how innovative they can be in their businesses due to limited access to high-speed broadband. While other companies can be more agile in their operations, rural small businesses are limited by slow data speeds and there is a need to increase speed to perform in the marketplace (Rampersad & Troshani, 2020). A shared belief across participants was having increased internet speed is a must when trying to conduct business online. One participant stated, "It would be nice to have internet service that was faster, we don't even have 4G, and I live in

the city part of the rural community” (RB3, June 30, 2020). Most participants also talked about during their interview the need to have additional towers to have not only faster, but reliable internet as well as stronger signal strengths.

When you start talking about us being able to send in paperwork to the state, we better not try and do it at the last minute. We have a lot of documents to upload and the internet just drags. If I did it at work, I would have no problem. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

“We need broadband to really boost the business environment. We don’t have access to that for schools or businesses” (RB8, July 10, 2020). “More internet provides and faster internet would definitely be a step in the right direction” (RB1, June 19, 2020).

### ***Environmental Factors***

Participants also repeatedly stated their internet service was extremely unreliable due to weather and environmental factors. The finding is supported by the difficulty in developing broadband infrastructure in rural areas. McCoy et al. (2018) found creating a broadband infrastructure in rural areas is challenging, and local governments must contend with not only the open-access fiber optic infrastructure, but also the physical infrastructure available. One participant said,

Internet service could be limited based on what is happening in the environment at the time. Weather wise you have to wonder, is it going to stay on or not, or sometimes it just goes out. I cannot tell you the number of hours that we have spent on the phone with a carrier trying to get it back on. (RB2, June 23, 2020)

Other participants echoed these same sentiments.

When it comes to moving orders online, you are kind of scared when you have orders and you only got two or three days and then bad weather will knock your internet out for hours, you can't operate a business good like that. (RB4, June 30, 2020)

"I've gotten cut off on meetings with people because the wind is blowing too hard, that's frustrating when you're trying to make designs and you have a short turnaround around time and the customer gets upset too" (RB5, July 7, 2020). "It could happen anywhere I guess, but I swear when it rains it pours when it comes to the internet. It is just not that reliable when we have bad weather and it freezes up a lot" (RB3, June 30, 2020).

The participants responded similarly even if they want to try and use internet marketing in their business, they did not feel they would be able to fully use it because of the unknowns due to having reliable internet most of the time.

#### **Theme 6: Social Media Comprehension**

Participants overwhelmingly responded that a lack of understanding of how social media sites can be used, features available on these sites, and a general understanding of how they work, hinders their ability to use them to market their products and services. The finding is supported by previous research on effective social media use and customer preference. Business owners cannot effectively use social media sites if their knowledge is limited. According to Icha and Agwu (2015), content, engagement, skills, and consistency are the core practices of maintaining a dynamic online presence. Site administrators must regularly publicize fresh and relevant information to command traffic and most small business owners do not possess the skillsets to accomplish this task (Icha & Agwu, 2015). Owners who are unable to post relevant and timely content lose whatever traffic they do have and seldom gain additional traffic to their sites.

## ***Owners***

Participants consistently discussed they are unable to use tools they did not know existed. According to Ashley and Tuten (2015), business owners should provide frequent data updates and utilize creative strategies, such as experiential, imagery, and exclusive communications, to use a variety of platforms, but many are unaware that specific platforms and analytic tools even exist. The participants shared a lack of understanding of how to use certain tools plays a role in deciding to use those tools. One participant said, “You can’t use features you don’t know that’s out there” (RB8, July 10, 2020). “We really online use online tools to communicate, like with emails and submitting paperwork like for grants for the business. I do know about Facebook, but that’s about it” (RB2, June 23, 2020). “When you talk about Twitter, Blogs, and that other stuff, I don’t even know what it is and how to start thinking about using that” (RB7, July 10, 2020). “Really, I didn’t even know you could do that on Facebook [use analytics]” (RB4, June 30, 2020).

I haven't used that [Facebook boost] since I didn't know you could do that. I do follow the shares. But I hadn't really used it for tracking how many people like the page and the feedback. This is embarrassing because I didn't know that I could actually look to see how many views and hits I actually have. (RB3, June 30, 2020)

“Yeah, I know Twitter is out there and YouTube, as well as Facebook, but the problem is how to actually use them. I’ve just been using Facebook when I can remember to post before and after pictures” (RB6, July 7, 2020).

Other participants were also unaware of the features available on certain platforms. RB3 said several times throughout the interview, “Can you tell me what you’re actually asking” (RB3, June 30, 2020). RB3 and RB4 also asked several times for the researcher to explain what was

meant by analytics or to name some of the available features so they understood what was being asked. Once explained, RB4 stated on questions related to social media features, “No, I don’t use any of those types of things. I mainly use it for the basic features like posting and commenting” (RB4, June 30, 2020).

### ***Customers***

The participants also discussed that social media comprehension and comfort is needed from the customers in order to be able to use it. This concern is consistent with results from previous studies that support the finding. Based on the clientele of small businesses, some customers are not as comfortable using the internet to make purchases due to security issues (Chakraborty et al., 2016). In the context of online shopping, given the importance of security and privacy, ease of use, awareness and comfort about security hazards can also be a significant differentiator in customer who purchase online and those who would rather purchase from brick and mortar (Ashley & Tuten, 2015).

For RB1 it was not so much she was unaware of the possible sites for which she could advertise their business, it was the understanding of how to effectively use those sites. RB1 shared,

Yeah, I know that stuff is out there, but how can I use a site like Instagram to sell tractors. It’s like some of the sites I feel like are more for personal use, but could be used for business use. I would feel better about taking the time to learn how to use these sites if I knew they talked to each other. For instance, how can I post something on Facebook and make sure it was automatically shared on Twitter, Instagram, and my website. (RB1, June 19, 2020)

Another participant shared a similar sentiment and said, “Oh yeah, I know about YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, but I only use Facebook. This is the only one I’ve ever used but I know the other ones can be used” (RB6, July 7, 2020). Other participants made similar statements. “We communicate with our clients either face-to-face, by sending letters, or by phone calls, because most of them don’t have internet or aren’t on social media” (RB2, June 23, 2020). “Most of my clients right now are individuals and organizations that know me or know someone who knows me, so they would rather reach out by phone. Especially when dealing with placing orders for an event’ (RB5, July 7, 2020).

### ***Relationship of Themes/Patterns to Research Questions***

Each of the six major themes discussed directly relates back to the research questions the researcher sought to address. The themes also related to the Technology Acceptance Model and Resource-based view of the firm theory developed in the conceptual framework. The major themes that emerged helped the research accomplish the goal of this study.

RQ1: Why do rural small business owners fail to use internet marketing to market their products and services?

The overwhelming majority of rural small business owners interviewed stated multiple factors play a role in the reason they do not use or ineffectively use the internet and social media marketing. Of the small business owners interviewed, the majority revealed rural small business owners, regardless of their knowing the importance of internet marketing, fail to use it as a marketing strategy. Although the importance of using internet-based technology as a marketing tool has been highlighted and understood, many small businesses are still not using internet marketing (Richmond et al., 2017). None of the participants interviewed currently have a website, and more than half use social media as a tool to market their rural business. There was

also a strong consensus of the rural small business owners: (a) have a lack of knowledge of internet marketing tools; (b) have available features on social media sites that could make them easier to use; (c) have prior experience in using internet marketing; (d) have a comfort level; and (e) have multiple human, infrastructure, and other factors that hinder their ability to use internet marketing. Similarly, the majority acknowledged several factors, including technology acceptance in terms of ease of use and available resources are key to why they are not using internet marketing. Based on the perceived usefulness and ease of use, many small business owners fail to adopt internet marketing strategies (Kull et al., 2016).

RQ1a: To what extent do rural small business owners understand how their failure to use internet marketing affects their business?

Rural small business owners interviewed held a solid consensus that internet marketing plays a significant role in business. Yet, only two participants mentioned the desire to learn how to use internet marketing tools to sustain and grow their small business. Of the participants interviewed, the majority stated they understood and were keenly aware of the impact not using the internet to market their products and services has on their business. In that same regard, most participants displayed an understanding of the various benefits and the value internet marketing could bring to their small businesses, specifically in terms of visibility, customer traffic, and an increase in revenues. Researchers Lewis and Reiley's (2014) findings support this finding, and they posited that implementing internet-based technology, such as websites for online advertising, can increase sales for businesses online and for brick and mortar stores.

Participants understood a failure to use internet marketing impacts their customer's experience, sales volume, and customer satisfaction related explicitly to response times, scheduling appointments, and viewing of available inventory. Even though participants

understand that internet marketing could eliminate geographic barriers and allows small businesses to present their product and service offerings to different groups of consumers and this brings significant value, they are still hesitant to engage, which speaks directly to the technology acceptance model. Davcik and Sharma (2016) posited the hesitation stems from capabilities for the small business owners, which can include skills and experiences of owners and employees, current internet technology infrastructure, and knowledge of internet marketing strategies. Participants specifically noted the significance internet marketing plays in potentially bringing value to their business, customers, and growth potential. Furthermore, participants understood the lack of internet marketing has caused low visibility, which impacts their ability to attract new customers, generate additional revenues, and grow their business.

RQ1b: What are the key factors, and to what extent do they influence rural small business owner's decision-making process in implementing internet marketing strategies?

The overwhelming majority of participants interviewed stated time constraints, capital, and human resources, geographic location, age, and reliable internet service are the primary factors that influence their decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a strategy. Osiri (2013) confirmed this finding when he posited rural small business owners tend to find it challenging to design and implement successful internet marketing strategies due to several specific factors. All of the participants interviewed are the key decision-makers in deciding how to market their small business. Study participants specifically spoke to having additional outside employment, the amount of time it takes to learn new skills, and other obligations put pressure on the time they have to implement internet marketing. The rural small business owners also spoke directly to the need to have additional monies, small business loans, and increased revenues and personnel to help them create and manage websites and social media

accounts. The lack of these two critical pieces was a significant factor in the decision-making process. There was a consensus among the participants that their geographic location also influenced their decision making. Half of the business owner's also stated their age, in terms of how long it would take to learn new technology and their belief their customers do not necessarily want to use the internet, but would rather work with people, is a factor. Participants also overwhelmingly expressed having reliable internet, especially in rural areas, hinders their ability to use internet marketing as a strategy fully.

### ***Summary of Findings***

This qualitative case study explored how rural small business owners make decisions related to using internet marketing as a marketing strategy by uncovering relevant factors that influence the business owner's decision-making process. The researcher interviewed eight small business owners and the factors that influence the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a marketing strategy. Six major themes were revealed that helped the researcher address the stated research questions. The rural small business owners demonstrated an understanding of the value that internet marketing could bring and the impact it could have on their small business, but several factors hinder them from implementing internet marketing. The findings revealed six primary factors influenced the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing, including time constraints, capital and human resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and social media comprehension.

None of the small business owners have any experience using websites, and only half used Facebook for marketing purposes, but no other social media platforms. The business owners were aware these platforms existed and could be used for marketing. A limited understanding of how to create websites, the features included on social media tools to boost

social media use, and online tools, in general, hindered the small business owner's ability to market effectively. Still, they were also reluctant to learn due to age and time factors. It is also understood while the small businesses would not change their geographic location, they did not express a willingness to learn how to use social media tools to grow beyond their location. Finally, access to reliable internet service was a key factor that hinders these rural small business owners from fully using internet marketing to market their businesses. While several factors influence rural business owners' decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing, these barriers can be addressed.

The researcher assessed the findings of the fieldwork from the technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm model. The technology acceptance model serves as a key model in understanding predictors of human behavior toward accepting or rejecting technology (Marangunic & Granic, 2015). The resource-based view of the firm is a strategic management theory that helps firms assess their resources to determine how it impacts their financial performance to achieve a competitive advantage (Alexy et al., 2018). The researcher applied the theories to the rural small business owner's in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama and noted a connection between the responses received and the basis for both theories. The owners' current experience, comfort, and knowledge level and their reluctance to accept technology along with the resources they have available in terms of time, infrastructure, capital, and human resources, influence the decision of owners not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing effectively.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

This research project explored the decision-making process rural small business owners use to make decisions about internet marketing. The focus of this work was on rural small

business owners and the specific factors that influence their decisions not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing. According to Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015), internet marketing is a multifaceted strategy that creates new channels for businesses to market their products and services, but often poses a challenge for small businesses due to various reasons and an even more significant challenge for those operating in rural areas. This study's findings provided impact not only on general business practice, but specifically in the field of marketing, and were evaluated reflecting the researcher's biblical worldview.

This research has found internet marketing can be advantageous for rural small businesses as a tool to increase visibility, increase customer traffic and revenues. The study of rural small businesses and their failure to adopt internet marketing is directly related to the field of business and marketing. Internet marketing is an advertising channel that provides businesses with the ability to reach specific audiences and measure the number of customers who view their products or services (Isoraite, 2017). The factors that influence business owners not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing have been identified in this study. Owners can implement plans to overcome these barriers since the benefit of using it is higher. Grubor and Jaksa (2018) pointed out internet marketing and modern technology have transformed how consumers interact, behave, communicate, and make purchases from businesses. Using internet marketing can open the door for rural small business owners to engage with more customers and make their products and services more visible. Grubor and Jaksa (2018) suggested that rural small businesses can engage with customers and tailor marketing messages specific to their customers' needs or potential customers through internet marketing, which can help improve customer traffic and revenues.

Although the importance of using internet-based technology as a marketing tool has been highlighted, many small businesses are still not using internet marketing (Richmond et al., 2017). The findings from this study confirmed rural small business owners understand the importance of using internet marketing and the value it can bring, but fail to do so because of various factors. Reviewed literature also suggested most small businesses do not have an internet marketing plan to help grow their businesses (Payne & Frow, 2006). The literature reviewed also showed most small business owners tend to struggle to design and implement successful internet marketing strategies due to limited resources, knowledge, and time (Osiri, 2013).

The resources available to rural small business owners are limited, and many have to decide where their scarce resources will be invested. This was highlighted in the findings and aligned with the literature reviewed. According to Intralak and Olsson (2011), limited resources to operate a business are common, and small businesses prioritize the few resources they have. The findings of this study showed, oftentimes, internet marketing and advertising are low on the priority list due to the factors identified, specifically time, capital, and personnel constraints. Reviewed literature suggests businesses need to invest in technological solutions to grow their business and engage with customers, but this area is deprioritized due to limited resources (Srivastava, 2012). As noted previously, small businesses must use technology to run a more efficient business, allocate resources appropriately, and engage with customers. However, the findings showed this is an area where small businesses do not make investments based on resources and technology acceptance.

As internet marketing presents value to rural small business owners, six key themes were present in the findings for practical business applications. Those themes were time constraints, capital and human resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and social media

comprehension. This study showed rural small businesses lack the necessary knowledge and resources to develop internet marketing strategies to help them build customer traffic and revenues with repeat visitors. Comparing reviewed literature to actual business practice and seeing the outcomes validated in the findings can be considered an achievement for business practices. The findings from this study show there are significant factors rural small business owners' face when deciding on internet marketing, and the recommendations will provide a starting place to overcome these barriers so they can perform the critical task of developing an online presence.

This study also explored several marketing concepts, including internet marketing, social media marketing, business exposure, revenue generation from marketing, and factors that influence marketing decisions. According to Shaltoni (2017), the adoption of internet marketing by small businesses vary to those who use state-of-the-art websites and multiple social media platforms to those who use none at all. Findings supported the variety of use of internet marketing and social media tools by business owners. Some owners had no presence at all, while others had a presence on Facebook, but not other platforms. As previously mentioned, the themes revealed a lack of knowledge and resources contributed to this variety of use. According to Mohan and Ali (2019), the concept of internet marketing in small businesses is it is an emerging tool for customer-focused marketing to maintain and grow relationships with customers. Developing plans to overcome the factors identified in the findings will help rural small businesses use internet marketing tools to become more customer-focused in their marketing and develop lasting relationships and growth. The knowledge from this study will help benefit the field of marketing.

The biblical framework pertaining to this study centered on sound decision making and proper allocation of resources to advance rural small businesses through strategic marketing decisions for business growth. This basis permeated this study's theoretical foundations, which were the technology acceptance model theory and the resource-based view of the firm theory. According to Van Duzer (2010), God's purpose for business is to operate a business in a manner that goods and services can be provided to help communities flourish and provide opportunities for others to engage in meaningful work. Whether the rural small business owners had some knowledge or none at all or many resources or just a few, they should be open to learning all they can and use whatever resources they have wisely to help fulfill God's purpose for business. Hardy (1990) associated this with being the representative of God by taking care of and using appropriately the resources he has provided for others' benefit and for his glory. The participants from this study showed they desire to grow their business, employ additional personnel, and advertise their business so they can better serve the community, but will need to overcome the relevant factors that present them. The time they spend in developing an online presence and engaging with their customer through the various online platforms may yield a considerable increase in customers, sales, and overall growth.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Based on this study's findings, the researcher identified five recommendations for action rural small business owners should consider to improve their internet and social media marketing, which could improve their visibility, customer traffic, and revenues. These recommendations include addressing the internet marketing/social media marketing knowledge gap, identify low to no-cost resources, creating an internet marketing and social media plan,

establishing an online presence, and creating a continuous monitoring and improvement plan for internet marketing.

As a result of the findings, rural small business owners need professional or subject matter experts to help them address their knowledge gap, to assist them in learning about platforms they can use, and the features on those platforms to create an online presence. Research shows online marketing has a broader market reach, and it is limitless in terms of time, space, and location. With these features, Fan and Tsai (2014) and Bell and Loane (2011) believed online marketing is a gateway for small businesses to reach the global market. Here, internet marketing tools, such as websites, emails, and blogs, offer small business owners access to different market niches that open business growth opportunities both locally and internationally. The following groups can help owners learn to use social media or use it more effectively. The local Small Business Development Center and Chamber of Commerce business incubator programs are two available resources. These organizations can help plan, launch, manage, and grow the small business's internet presence.

According to Claffey and Brady (2014), two-way communication between the businesses and their target audience has two significant benefits. First, businesses have an opportunity to build their brand and reputation, and it allows businesses to receive feedback from customers and respond to problems. As social networking sites evolve, small businesses should take advantage of these innovations to grow their customer base and target markets (Hodge et al., 2015). Also, the University of West Alabama's (UWA) Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) program can be used as a resource in setting up and training small business owners on how to manage social media sites through the student worker and internship programs.

As a result of the findings, the researcher recommends rural small businesses utilize low to no-cost assistance for training, creating internet marketing, and social media planning. According to research by Sedera et al. (2016), small businesses do not have the necessary resources to compete with established companies within the same industries because they have fewer resources to invest in marketing. In the same regard, according to a study by Chimucheka and Mandipaka (2015), small business owners cannot afford the high cost of accessing advisory services and training in the area of internet marketing. Rural small business owners need low to no-cost assistance to ensure they get their products and services in the same market space as their competitors. Through the Small Business Administration ([www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)), the UWA's Small Business Development Center ([www.uwa.edu](http://www.uwa.edu)), the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce ([www.sumterchamber.com](http://www.sumterchamber.com)), the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce ([www.demopolisareachamber.com](http://www.demopolisareachamber.com)), and rural small businesses can learn to integrate and implement internet marketing at a relatively low cost.

The SBA, SBDC, and Chambers of Commerce provide low to no-cost training opportunities for rural small business owners to learn the tools they need to reduce the knowledge gap. These organizations also provide networking opportunities for owners to connect with potential hires or volunteers for assistance. According to Bostanshirin (2014), websites and social media sites allow businesses and consumers to network and develop meaningful relationships. Finally, these organizations can help small business owners utilize social media more effectively and create a continuous monitoring and improvement plan for their chosen platforms at low to no-cost. The findings showed capital is a significant factor, and this confirmed the literature reviewed by Jaganathan et al. (2018) suggested the adoption of technology in marketing is subject to the financial position of small business owners.

The UWA IMC program and UWA School of Business program can be a resource for small business owners to work with student workers or interns to establish their websites or social media sites as recommended. Lewis and Reiley (2014) found that implementing internet-based technology, such as websites or social media sites for online advertising, can increase sales for businesses online and for brick and mortar stores. Small business owners should decide whether to set up a website or social media accounts to establish an online presence. If an online presence exists, business owners should work with students to create content and a content calendar to use social media more effectively. This is an important recommendation, and the literature reviewed suggests, nearly 92% of consumers rely on the internet to obtain information about goods and services (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). This point is important because it shows the spread of online shoppers in the marketplace that rural small business owners miss by not having a presence.

Students could assist small business owners with the initial setup and provide training on how to use the platforms. Small business owners who have some resources to hire additional personnel may consider hiring an intern who will provide cost savings compared to hiring a professional full time. This would make the cost of establishing an online presence considerably low, and online marketing could help the business with operational efficiency (Porto et al., 2017). Finally, it is recommended that once an online presence is established or updated, owners should create a monitoring and continuous improvement plan to use social media and internet marketing effectively. According to Icha and Agwu (2015), to sustain a vibrant online presence, small business owners must learn to and develop skills such as site optimization, monitoring, graphics manipulation, research, and analytics.

These five recommendations can provide valuable resources to rural small business owners and managers that will assist in establishing and growing their online presence to improve visibility, customer traffic, and revenues. The Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Center for Business and Entrepreneurial Services (CBES), and other local organizations that assist small business owners also benefit from the findings of this study. These organizations, along with local area Chambers of Commerce and Workforce Development Centers, are located within the area where the study was performed and offer low to no-cost business consulting workshops and training. They also offer connections to low to no-cost resources for prospective and existing entrepreneurs. In addition, future researchers looking to study rural small business owners and their internet marketing habits would benefit from this study's findings. Finally, the findings of this study are likely to impact customers indirectly. The findings from this study will provide rural small business owners with the tools to grow their business and provide increased visibility, customer engagement, and customer satisfaction. Customers can enjoy more options from businesses they did not know existed or the products or services they have to offer and more engagement with the small business owners through two-way conversations in an online environment.

There are several methods the researcher identified to disseminate the findings of the study. First, coordinate with local organizations such as the SBDC, CBES, Chambers of Commerce, and Workforce Development Centers to offer training sessions for entrepreneurs focused on internet marketing and available resources. Next, coordinate with the local University to provide Lunch and Learns or Roundtable events to other community leaders and program sponsors who support rural small business owners in marketing their products and services. Finally, publish articles and present at professional conferences, such as Alabama's Small

Business Development Center Network, on the findings of this study and the importance of effective internet marketing to grow small businesses.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

While exploring the factors that affect rural small business owners' decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing in their business, the researcher identified areas for further study. First, further studies can attempt to gain the perspective of larger rural small business owners with more than 15 employees. The rural small business owners who participated had less than five employees. Future researchers can seek to determine if rural small business owners who have more employees would consider the same factors found in this study.

Secondly, this study included the perspective of business owners primarily from the retail and service industries. Further studies can seek to gain the perspective of rural small business owners in various industries. Further studies could be done to determine whether the factors would be similar in the agriculture, healthcare, manufacturing, or education industries, among others. Based on who they serve and how they communicate, a more in-depth understanding could be gained from these new perspectives. Thirdly, future studies could include an analysis of rural small business owners based on the number of years in operation. For example, this might provide additional insight into whether business owners who have been in operation for 1-5 years have the same sentiments as business owners who have been in operation for 6-10 years or 20 plus years.

There were also additional limitations to the study. First, the researcher used a small sample size of eight rural small business owners. A larger sample size could further enhance the saturation of data collected from the participants. Second, this qualitative case study was confined to rural small business owners in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. This

provided a small aspect of geographical representation and was not representative of the United States. Finally, the sample was not representative of all races and ethnicities within the United States. Including individuals from different geographical locations and races and ethnicities could have raised new perspectives and revealed additional factors not captured in this study's findings. Given these limitations, it is recommended for future studies to use a larger sample size, identify additional geographic areas of rural small business owners, and identify participants from different races and ethnic backgrounds. Conducting a study of rural small business owners in other countries could also provide additional insights into the factors that influence rural small business owner's failure to use internet marketing.

## **Reflections**

In this qualitative study, it was important for the researcher to reflect on the experience, possible biases or preconceived ideas and values, the possible effects on the participants, and any changes in thinking as a result of the study. It was also important for the researcher to reflect on biblical principles. This was important because in qualitative research the researcher serves as the primary data collection instrument. The data collection process was very challenging and rewarding for the researcher. The researcher had to reschedule several interviews at the beginning of the process, but was able to complete all planned interviews to collect the needed data. Time is very valuable. For rural small business owners during a pandemic, it did prove challenging to stick to the first scheduled interview for several of them. Conducting most of the interviews via Zoom also proved a little challenging as some business owners were interrupted by others during the interviews. Regardless of the few distractions and multiple reschedules, the researcher was able to conduct all interviews as stated in the field study plan and in keeping with the best practices of data collection.

As a way to avoid bias, the researcher was careful to use the same criteria for each business and ask the questions in the same manner for all participants. The researcher was sure to limit interaction and avoid excessive comments during the interviews to reduce interviewer bias or lead participants to respond to questions in a particular manner. Before the interviews, the researcher assumed most of the business owners would have limited to no internet marketing and also limited knowledge of internet marketing tools. However, approximately half of the small business owners had knowledge of sites and tools available, but very little knowledge of how to use the tools for marketing their small businesses. Consequently, the researcher had a change in thinking concerning the owner's general awareness of social media sites.

Sound decision making and proper allocation of resources to advance a rural small business through strategic marketing decisions using a biblical worldview can help business owners achieve their goals and objectives using God's purpose for business as a guide. Owners need to make sound business decisions with as much knowledge as possible, and scriptures help inform this. Proverbs 18:13 says, "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (NIV). Proverbs 18:17 says, "the first to present his case seems right, til another comes forward and questions him." These Bible verses provide insight into how business owners should seek understanding and knowledge when making decisions that affect their businesses' outcome. Business owners should seek information that helps them make informed decisions instead of making decisions based on fear, lack of knowledge, or a lack of understanding. In the case of this study, rural small business owners should seek cost-effective marketing strategies so they can allocate already scarce resources to the marketing area of operations. As said in the scripture 2 Corinthians 9:10, "for God is the one who provides seed for the farmer then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of

generosity in you.” Small businesses often have limited resources to market their products or services. If resources, whether physical, human, or financial, are allocated appropriately, small businesses may realize business success.

This process helped the researcher learn more about the level of understanding that rural small business owners have about marketing, internet marketing, social media marketing, and the challenges they face. Despite the early challenges in the data collection process, the researcher found this process to be a valuable learning experience. The researcher has a greater appreciation of the challenges associated with qualitative primary data collection.

### **Summary and Study Conclusions**

Identifying factors and creating a plan to overcome the factors that influence rural small business owners not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing is important for business growth and revenue generation. This qualitative case study was designed to explore how rural small business owners make decisions related to using internet marketing as a marketing strategy by uncovering relevant factors that influence the decision-making process. The general problem addressed was the lack of internet marketing used by small business owners. The specific problem addressed was the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners within the southeastern United States, resulting in a loss of customer traffic and revenues. This qualitative study was performed on eight rural small businesses located in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. The rural small business owners participated in a 45-60-minute interview to help the researcher uncover specific factors that influence their decisions not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing.

The findings revealed that six primary factors influenced the business owner’s decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing, including time constraints, capital and human

resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and social media comprehension. The findings showed all business owners interviewed are the primary decision-makers for their small businesses' marketing. Only half use the internet to support their small business operation on a day to day basis. The findings also showed participants had minimal knowledge of specific internet tools that could help market their small businesses in an automated fashion. The findings also showed participants' understood the various benefits and the value that internet marketing could bring to their small businesses, specifically in terms of visibility, customer traffic, and an increase in revenues. Participants also consistently agreed their decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing impacts their customer experience, sales volume, and customer satisfaction related explicitly to response times, scheduling appointments, and view available inventory. Finally, the findings showed the significant factors influencing owner's failure to use internet marketing were time constraints, capital, and human resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and an understanding of social media tools and features available.

The findings of this study closed the gap in the literature related to factors that influence rural small business owner's lack of adoption of internet marketing by identifying relevant and specific factors that affect the owner's decision making. Addressing this gap can help rural small business owners recognize the barriers related to their marketing strategy and create a plan to overcome these barriers. Rural small business owners are not using internet marketing as a marketing strategy, which leads to reduced visibility, customer traffic, and revenues, and they must create a plan to address the factors creating barriers in getting their products and services in the hands of customers.

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### **Appendix A: Recruitment Email**

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 An Exploration of Rural Small Business Owners Experience with Internet Marketing. The purpose of my research is to investigate factors that influence rural small business owners decisions related to using the internet to market their small business. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

If you are a small business owner who makes marketing decisions for your business in Sumter or Marengo county in Alabama, have less than 15 employees, do not use internet marketing as part of your marketing strategy, are above 18 years of age and are willing to participate, you are eligible for the study.

Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview about your small business marketing activities which should take approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. In order to participate, please contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] to schedule an interview.

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. 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.

Sincerely,

Veronica Triplett  
DBA Candidate

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

**Title of the Project:** An Exploration of Rural Small Business Owners Experience with Internet Marketing.

**Principal Investigator:** Veronica Triplett, DBA Candidate, Liberty University

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring the lack of internet marketing as a marketing strategy used by small business owners. You were selected as a possible participant because you own or manage a small business in Sumter or Marengo counties in Alabama. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this form and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to take part in this research project. I am a doctoral candidate in the school of business at Liberty University and I am completing this research as part of my doctoral degree.

**Background Information:** The purpose of the study is to investigate factors that influence rural small business owners decisions related to using the internet to market their small business. The goal is to understand the factors that influence rural small business owner's decisions to use or not use internet marketing.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face semi-structured interview about your small business marketing activities which should take approximately 45 minutes to one hour to complete. The interview will be recorded through digital audio and your answers will be kept confidential and the findings will not disclose your identity. The researcher will also take written notes during the interview.

**Benefits of being in the Study:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Your responses will provide valuable information as this study is designed to compare actual business practice to reviewed literature. Your responses will also help others gain a better understanding of how the lack of internet marketing affects rural small businesses.

**Risks of being in the Study:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. A possible risk is that you may not be comfortable answering particular questions about your business. To decrease the risk, you may choose to skip the questions and/or stop participating at any time.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any report the researcher might publish, the researcher will not include any identifiable information that will make it possible to identify a participant. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Each participant will receive an assigned code they will be referred to in the study findings. This will ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.

- Data will be kept on a personal password-protected document on the researcher's flash drive and on a password-locked personal laptop 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.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not 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 Veronica Triplett. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Ryan Ladner at [REDACTED].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Statement of Consent:** By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

*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.

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Printed Participant Name

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Signature & Date

### **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

1. In what industry does your business operate? (Clarify industries: retail, healthcare, food & beverage, miscellaneous)
2. Tell me about how you use the internet in your business on a day-to-day basis. (Possible probes Accounting/ Bookkeeping? Payroll? Marketing?)
3. In general, tell me how you define marketing? (Possible probe: Tell me more about what marketing looks like for you on a day-to-day basis?)
4. How do you currently market your products/services? (Possible probes: Tell me about the ways you use the internet for marketing your products/ services. Tell me about the specific social media platforms you use, if any, to market your products/services.)
5. Who is the key decision-maker on how to market your business? (Possible probe: Tell me about others who could influence the decision-maker on how to market your business.)
6. Tell me about internet marketing. (Possible probe: Tell me more about what internet marketing means for your business specifically.)
7. What is your experience with internet marketing? (Possible probe: What is your experience with implementing internet marketing? How often do you use internet marketing?)
8. Tell me how comfortable you are using the internet in general. (Possible probe: Tell me how you use Social Media Sites. Tell me more about the features you use on social media sites. Tell me about how you use E-marketing tools. Tell me about the features you use on said sites.)
9. Tell me about how you use online tools (such as websites, blogs, or social media sites) to manage your online reputation. (Possible probe: Tell me more about how you manage your online reputation. In general, what does your reputation management plan look like.)
10. Tell me about how you use any third party email marketing services in your business (i.e. Constant Contact, Mailchimp. Benchmark). (Possible probes: Tell me about other tools you use to send mass emails or messages to your customers. Tell me about other tools you use that have templates to help automate your marketing messages to your customers.)
11. How have you seen internet marketing bring value to you? (Possible probe: Value to customers? Value to others?)

12. What is your opinion on how internet marketing can be used effectively for promoting your business? (Possible probe: For engaging customers? For providing increased customer service?)
13. In your opinion, what are three specific things you think internet marketing can help your small business do? (Possible probe: Related to customer traffic? Related to increased revenues? Related to increased sales?)
14. In your opinion, tell me how visible you feel your business is to customers. (Possible probe: Tell me how you feel internet marketing could affect your visibility?)
15. How has the decision not to market your business online impacted your business? (Possible probe: Impacted customer expectations? Impacted customer satisfaction? Impacted sales volume?)
16. Describe the decision making process you follow when deciding how to market your business. (Possible probe: Tell me more about the steps in the process.)
17. Tell me about your reasons for not using internet marketing for your business. (Possible probe: Geographic location? Age? Time? Access to broadband?)
18. What hinders your ability to market effectively online? (Possible probe: Human resources? Infrastructure? Capital? Knowledge of the internet? Knowledge of internet marketing tools like social media sites and email marketing?)

## Appendix D: Examples of Transcript & Coding Process

### Sample Transcript with Notes

Interviewee: Yeah, we are doing a lot of business with like kind of old school banks and things like that. Like if they finance equipment for somebody, and they have to have things faxed and you can't even buy a fax machine these days, I don't even know where to go. So we figured this whole trick out

V Triplett: Perfect. Okay, just in general, tell me about how you define marketing.

Interviewee: I mean, I guess if I were to just define it in my own words, I would say it's the way in which you advertise your business and your product to your consumers.

V Triplett: And then what does that look like for you on a day to day basis.

Interviewee: Um, for the most part, [Spouse Name] has, you know, he has an actual lot... physical presence, where he can market things. So if a customer calls him he can show them the merchandise. He also advertises in tractor house magazine which is like a web based catalog, but also they put out hardcopy magazines.

*Note: TractorHouse.com is a web based, but the interviewee uses it more for the hardcopy magazine that is mailed to subscribers. General information is provided but content is organized by TractorHouse*

Interviewee: And so customers from all over get that magazine, they can get his phone number and they can come, you know, physically see the tractor if they want to, at the lot or he also does a lot of advertising on his Facebook page. So those are the two ways. I would say tractor house and Facebook. And then, as well as you know people physically come and take a look would be the ways in which he markets his products.

V Triplett: And you mentioned Facebook is one specific social media platform you use. Are there any others that you use on a regular basis?

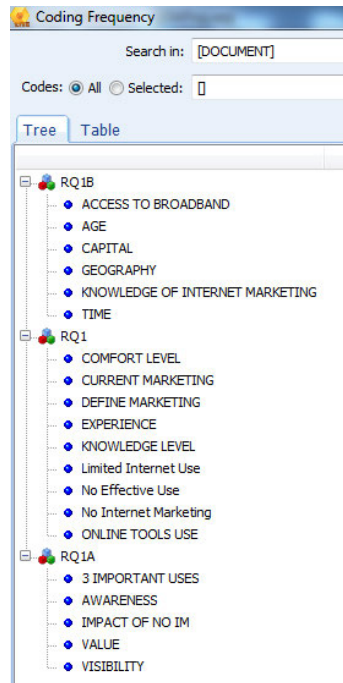
Interviewee: No, we both said that we thought we were try to get into.....Gosh, what is the other one. This is how behind the time we are. So we've not got other platforms, not Facebook but Instagram. We would like to try to do Instagram. My job. My goal for this year was to get the webpage going. And then if we can get that going. We will do Instagram and link them all together some kind of way, but we're learning as we go.

*Note: Interviewee is not as familiar with other social media sites and sounded a bit frustrated when trying to remember names of others.*

Interviewee: See all the time and ask questions like this you do this.



## Codes organized through QDA Miner Lite



1	Category	Code	Count	% Codes	% Case
2	RQ1B	TIME	11	6.3%	100.0%
3	RQ1B	GEOGRAPHY	4	2.3%	75.0%
4	RQ1B	CAPITAL	5	2.8%	50.0%
5	RQ1B	ACCESS TO BROADBAND	9	5.1%	100.0%
6	RQ1B	KNOWLEDGE OF INTERNET MARKETING	14	8.0%	100.0%
7	RQ1	KNOWLEDGE LEVEL	9	5.1%	75.0%
8	RQ1	COMFORT LEVEL	12	6.8%	100.0%
9	RQ1	ONLINE TOOLS USE	16	9.1%	100.0%
10	RQ1	EXPERIENCE	8	4.5%	75.0%
11	RQ1	DEFINE MARKETING	5	2.8%	100.0%
12	RQ1	CURRENT MARKETING	16	9.1%	100.0%
13	RQ1	No Internet Marketing	2	1.2%	50.0%