

# Factors That Hinder Rural Small Business Owners from Adopting Internet Marketing as a Strategy

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## Abstract

This study included exploring how rural small business owners use Internet marketing as a strategy. To understand the small business owner's experiences, this study uncovered relevant factors influencing the business owner during decision-making. 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 has on their businesses, and the specific factors that influence them not to use or ineffectively. The owners were the primary decision-makers for their business, and the interviews provided the qualitative data used to develop a list of crucial factors influencing the decision-making process, including 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.

## Keywords

Internet Marketing, Social Media, Rural Small Businesses

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## 1. Background and Introduction

Internet marketing can significantly impact rural small businesses in terms of revenue generation and customer traffic. This qualitative study included factors that hinder rural small business owners from adopting Internet marketing as a strategy. Understanding these factors can help identify gaps that could potentially boost revenues and customer traffic. In this section, I provided an overview

of the general and specific business problems and the method used to explore the problem. This section includes information about the research questions, conceptual framework, definitions of terms, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, and the significance of the study. I provided a review of the professional literature directly related to the problem to justify the study's purpose, instilling in the audience a sense of hope and optimism about the potential benefits of addressing these gaps.

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 struggle to design and implement successful Internet marketing strategies because of 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 that their marketing strategies align with how consumers are purchasing products and services. This assumption 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 that small business owners should consider that 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 many consumers make 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 et al., 2013). 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) concluded that 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 that fail because of a lack of visibility and low revenue generation.

### 1.1. Purpose Statement

This qualitative study explores how rural small business owners use Internet marketing as a marketing strategy. This study uncovered relevant factors influencing the business owner's decision-making process to understand the business owner's experiences. Mohan and Ali (2019) stated that small businesses face

many challenges 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 to their marketing strategy and create a plan to overcome them. 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 more significant 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 it affects businesses.

## **1.2. Research Question**

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 owners' decision-making process regarding implementing Internet marketing strategies?

These research questions helped answer the overarching question and fulfill the purpose of this qualitative study. The primary research question revealed rural small business owners' lack of internet marketing. The secondary research questions illustrated the breadth of awareness business owners have regarding the impacts of Internet marketing on their businesses. The secondary research questions also uncovered the specific factors that influence the business owner's non-use of Internet marketing to provide an understanding of the business owner's experiences.

## **1.3. Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

The first assumption is that participants in the study will provide insightful, honest, and complete feedback during the interviews. I 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 that the business owners interviewed have not adopted or fully adopted internet marketing as a marketing strategy. I screened each business before the invitation to participate to ensure this criterion was met.

The limitations of this study included the types and locations of the small businesses selected to be interviewed. The rural small businesses were 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 were not represented in this study. The locations and industries of the small

businesses selected hindered the generalizing of the results. The delimitations known in this study included the study's scope and the participants' knowledge level. 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.

#### 1.4. Significance of the Study

This qualitative study explored the factors influencing rural small business owners' 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 owners' experiences with Internet marketing and factors influencing their adoption of Internet marketing.

## 2. A Review of the Academic Literature

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 is crucial 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 they impact 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 the theory of planned behavior (Davis, 1989). This model is critical in understanding predictors of behavior toward accepting or rejecting 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 explain and predict technology acceptance among individuals (Mortenson & Vidgen, 2016). TAM focuses on two primary beliefs about technology: perceived usefulness and ease of use (Marangunic & Granic, 2015). 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 individuals' adoption or lack of technology adoption. [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 of 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 perceived usefulness and ease of use. The TAM model fits well with this study's purpose: to determine the factors influencing rural small business owners' actions toward adopting Internet technology. This model can also help guide the work needed to address this study's research questions. The TAM model will help me understand why small rural business owners fail to use Internet marketing, the extent to which they understand how not using this technology affects their business, and what key factors influence the business owner's experience in implementing 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 helpful in understanding in more depth how resources can be strategically combined to give the firm a competitive advantage in its industry ([Barney, 1991](#); [Wemerlet, 1984](#)). This model serves as a critical 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 because of several factors ([Kull et al., 2016](#)).

Researchers, including [Halabi and Lussier \(2014\)](#), [Davcik and Sharma \(2016\)](#), and [Kull et al. \(2016\)](#), among others, used the resource-based view in their studies and further developed the framework. Several studies have been conducted using the resource-based view model to understand the factors that influence business owners' adoption or lack of technology adoption. [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 critical marketing resources needed in wine firms in Italy.

When considering the resource-based view regarding factors that influence rural small business owners' 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 firm's internal resources. The resource-based view fits well with the purpose of this study, which is to determine the factors,

including knowledge, skills, and abilities, that influence rural small business owners' actions toward adopting 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 me identify key factors influencing business owners' experience implementing Internet marketing strategies.

The internet revolutionized how businesses operate, communicate, and engage with various stakeholders. As a business tool, internet service enables 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.

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 adoption rate of ICT infrastructure and strategies is slower among small businesses than larger ones. The problem is even worse in rural areas where digital inequalities persist because of unique social, economic, and territorial factors (Philip & Williams, 2019). Also, rural small businesses fail to adopt ICT because of a 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 depend 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, using internet-based marketing tools helps businesses lower the cost of marketing and allows business owners to promptly provide product information to customers (Chao et al., 2012). Additionally, Jones et al. (2015) asserted that internet marketing promotes intensive use of available resources, enhances brand visibility, and increases customer traffic, unlike conventional marketing models. Despite these benefits, Richmond et al. (2017) determined that most rural small businesses fail to use internet-based technology to market their products even with broadband access. This finding underlines the need to examine why rural small business owners fail to use Internet marketing, the associated consequences, and the factors influencing their experiences implementing Internet marketing strategies.

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

Many researchers acknowledge that numerous factors qualify Internet marketing as a marketing strategy for 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 Internet use among consumers allows marketers to reach and connect with prospective clients through digital communication platforms, such as social media and companies' websites. Zickuhr et al. (2013) stated that nearly 92% of consumers rely on the Internet to obtain information about goods and services. This point is essential 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 allow potential customers 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 firm's size. For big businesses, online marketing serves as a cost-cutting strategy and mass customization of marketing content (Yannopoulos, 2011). As a cost-saving strategy, internet-based marketing reduces the marginal cost of distribution of 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 so that consumers can choose a combination of products. For example, businesses can use search engine optimization to increase site visits and simultaneously utilize recommendation systems to suggest alternatives for the consumer depending on their preferences, as evidenced by keywords supplied (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). This strategy mainly applies 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 because small enterprises lack economies of scale and resources to capitalize on this aspect of Internet marketing (Johnson et al., 2019). The reality is that those small business owners, particularly those in rural areas, deal with unbundled products. These rural small businesses also lack the capital to create secure sites that guarantee security for consumer information. Consumers are usually skeptical of doing business online due to trust and privacy issues. These issues collectively help explain why small businesses are disadvantaged regarding online-based branding relative to large companies in this strategy. 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 is a critical component of an integrated marketing communication plan, and 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 is an electronic trade show where businesses exhibit product and service offerings. On the part of the consumers, the internet serves as an exhibition hall, 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, business owners 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 marketing attributes: direct selling and advertising. Therefore, optimizing a company website can help businesses generate awareness, demonstrate product attributes, and supply product information to consumers. These 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 suitable for rural small businesses.

Internet marketing has a vital role in distribution strategies. Distribution strategies can be viewed from two perspectives: the interactions among channel members, the distribution of products across multiple channels, and their effectiveness (Sharma et al., 2019). Internet marketing features attributes of a conventional retail store and a delivery medium. 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 conveniently. Also, it grants customers the freedom to order goods and services without visiting the stores physically, reducing 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 business logistics requirements, making service delivery more efficient.

#### **Revenue Generation**

According to Demishkevich (2015), internet marketing promotes revenue generation. Broadly, internet marketing generates revenue 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, es-

establishing an online presence cost considerably less, which helps a business save because of reduced marketing expenses. Online marketing promotes operational efficiency, lowering daily operations costs (Porto et al., 2017).

Regarding revenue generation and customer traffic, online marketing effectively expands brand awareness, attracting a loyal customer base that maintains and grows sales (Porto et al., 2017). Brand building inspires loyalty as customers develop individual perceptions about a given company's products. 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, to reap the benefits highlighted above.

#### **Internet Marketing Tools**

Small business owners should not only adopt internet marketing tools to reap the many benefits they provide, but they should also ensure they are using them effectively. 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 covering the seven functional blocks of social media, including identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

#### **Marketing in Small Businesses**

Alford and Page (2015) investigated the adoption of small businesses' marketing technology. 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 researchers, small business owners depend on systems of action that incorporate marketing. Alford and Page's findings revealed that developing aggressive marketing techniques aids business owners in creating niche markets. Alford and Page (2015) posited that small businesses use the internet's value in marketing through process reengineering, management skills, and innovation experience for sustainable competitive advantages. Researchers show that the application of web-based marketing by small businesses is limited due to the availability of resources (Alford & Page, 2015). Turner and Endres (2017) suggested that the failure of small businesses in Internet marketing is associated with a lack of cap-

ital. Marketing is essential 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 that 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 study aimed to provide insight into using the Internet in marketing and examine the factors influencing its application. The research findings supported the Blankson et al. (2018) argument that small and medium-sized enterprises use marketing 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 that the Internet is a vital marketing tool for small and medium-sized enterprises, but the availability of resources limits its use.

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

Chimucheka and Mandipaka (2015) noted that obstacles in management functions and marketing practices threaten the growth and sustainability of a small business. According to the researchers, small businesses experience challenges in accessing appropriate and practical information and technology relating to marketing. A corresponding study by Rugova and Prenaj (2016) supported this argument by stating that the lack of understanding of Internet marketing contributes to the underutilization of 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 Internet marketing. Commonly, small business owners or management teams do not recognize the need to upgrade their skills because of complacency (Chimucheka & Mandipaka, 2015). A more recent study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) noted that the lack of awareness is one of the critical barriers to small businesses' adoption of the Internet as a marketing tool. Undeniably, limited information literacy remains a significant challenge for small business owners locally and globally.

A study by Jaganathan et al. (2018) showed that 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 that resources owned by business owners differentiate the performance levels and make provision for businesses' competitive advantage. Karimi and Naghibi (2015) found differences 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 that small and medium-sized enterprise marketers face internal barriers when adopting the Internet as a marketing tool due to inadequate financial resources.

#### **Factors Influencing Internet Adoption**

Adopting the Internet for marketing is essential for business survival, but owners understand little about it. According to research, technology can change small businesses in various ways, including customer relationships, new market access, co-creation, business-to-business collaboration, and customization (Alford & Page, 2015). Soltani et al. (2015) posited that introducing marketing practices and using innovation enhances such institutions' efficiency. Alford and Page (2015) supported this argument by explaining that firms that utilize the web's unique value through innovation and process reengineering will likely achieve sustainable advantage. The authors affirmed that adopting technology as a marketing tool depends on various resources, including money and time (Alford & Page, 2015; Soltani et al., 2015). According to Ramayah et al. (2016), one of the main reasons small and medium enterprises are reluctant to implement technology in marketing is the limited available resources.

Based on the technology acceptance model, the adoption and use of the internet have been a significant concern influenced by different factors such as contextual and technology attributes (Dwivedi et al., 2019). Ahmad et al. (2015) noted that the current business environment requires small businesses to stay competitive within the domestic marketplace. 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 that social media is a practical approach for small and medium enterprises to advertise goods and services. Their argument was supported by Soltani et al.'s (2015) research, which stated that the use of technology is influenced by various aspects, which include finance, competition, and skills.

Ramayah et al. (2016) noted that internal factors such as adoption attitude, innovativeness, organizational size, and workers' knowledge influence the use of technology in marketing. The researchers affirmed that adopting the Internet depends on internal and external aspects. The findings were exemplified by Razak and Latip (2016), who stated that the factors that influence the use of social media in marketing include trust, cost-effectiveness, interactivity, and compatibility. Noticeably, there is an increase in 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 that awareness, limited skills, poor investment, and limited information are vital to adopting technology among rural small businesses. The researchers noted that technological infrastructure re-

mains a critical aspect that determines the level of adoption by SMEs. According to the current research, internal factors significantly impact small and medium enterprises' espousal of the Internet for marketing practices.

### 3. Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study is qualitative. This methodology facilitates the collection of in-depth information from a group of participants to understand a complex issue in a real-life context and generate a broader appreciation of this issue (Stake, 2010). Using 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), a complex issue can be examined where little knowledge currently exists when using the qualitative method. 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.

#### 3.1. Participants

I carefully selected the study participants based on the U.S. Small Business Administration's definition of a small business, a for-profit business with fewer than 500 employees and generated less than \$500,000 in revenues (SBA, 2016). This study defines a small business as a business with a maximum of 15 employees. Participants were selected based on their geographic location and current use of or lack of Internet marketing. Through a recruitment email, 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. I work with Mr. Donald Mills, SBDC Director, with rural small business owners who use both centers' services at no cost to help start or expand a small business. I obtained contact information for potential participants who met the study's requirements and then contacted the participants to elicit participation in the study. I interviewed eight rural small business owners in either Sumter or Marengo counties in Alabama. To conduct an in-depth study and gain the most incredible insight, it is suggested that researchers select a few participants rather than several (Fuggard & Potts, 2015; Guetterman, 2015).

I took the necessary steps to ensure that the ethical protection of participants was adequate. According to Yin (2014), researchers must follow ethical practices when conducting a research study. I gained informed consent from all participants in the study and protected their privacy. To maintain the privacy of the participants, I emailed or delivered a consent form to each to review and complete. The consent form allowed me to gain permission to participate, record audio interviews, and review the small businesses' personnel and financial documents. To maintain confidentiality, I designated a code for all small business owners as participants in the written report.

### 3.2. 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 is to draw participants 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 served by one of these entities is that they are already taking active steps to grow their small business.

I used the purposeful sampling method to enlist participants. I selected the purposeful sampling method 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) 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 select potential participants rich in information to gain the most significant insights and in-depth understanding regarding the research questions. To conduct an in-depth study and gain the most significant insight, researchers should select a few participants rather than several (Guetterman, 2015; Robinson, 2014). Creswell (2013) suggested that researchers conduct qualitative, in-depth interviews with four to five individuals. Baskarada (2014) suggested that a sample size of six to eight participants should allow the researcher to reach data saturation. Boddy (2016) suggested that when using a single market population in a case study design, data saturation could be reached with a maximum of 12 in-depth interviews. In addition, Fuggard and Potts (2015) supported this view by suggesting that a sample size of four to 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 me ensure that the potential participants have experienced the issue being researched (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Four criteria to interview participants met 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 in either Sumter or Marengo County in Alabama. Third, the

business owner does not use or ineffectively use 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 me understand the small business owner's decision-making experiences related to internet marketing.

### 3.3. Data Collection

#### Instruments

This qualitative study's primary data collection instrument 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 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. Qualitative researchers have previously used the semi-structured interview approach (Murphy & Kielgast, 2008; Pandey & Chawla, 2016). The interview questions were phrased so participants quickly understood 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.

I 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 owners 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 regarding internet marketing. This set of questions helped the researcher understand to what extent small business owners realize how Internet marketing could impact their small businesses. The final interview questions asked the small business owners about factors influencing 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 influencing the business owner's decision not to use Internet marketing. The questions and order were built on each other so that respondents consider all factors influencing their decision to 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

The data collection occurred using a semi-structured interview guide with

participants. Participants were interviewed once, and all data was collected during that time. The interviews were virtual or face-to-face, 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 participants have not adopted technology for their businesses, which could have posed a barrier to using technology during the interview. This method was chosen because it helped me read nonverbal signs from the business owner, which is essential 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 of the interviews was imperative so I did not miss critical information because of distractions during the interview or note-taking. According to Sutton and Austin (2015), an audio recording will help me 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 recorder. After each interview, I 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.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

Yin's (2014) data analysis process, a systematic process used in qualitative research, will be used during this research phase. 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, a specific type of pattern matching that determines the cause of how or why something happened (Yin, 2014). This technique explains how business owners decide whether to 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 that researchers transcribe audio files into

written text before analyzing the data. I followed this guideline by transcribing the audio files into written text using Microsoft Word after each interview. After transcribing the audio files, I paired any written notes with the transcripts. The second step was coding the data into themes (Creswell, 2013). After data collection and transcription, I 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. I coded the data using the software program.

According to Creswell (2013), the third step was identifying significant themes, reasoning from participants, and organizing the data. I clustered these statements into meaningful themes to use the data to answer the research questions by identifying, evaluating, and reporting occurring themes from the transcripts (Jugder, 2016). I identified statements expressed by the participants from each case that directly explained why 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 I grouped significant statements together across multiple cases. Yin (2014) recommended synthesizing the themes into categories and assigning descriptive words to each segment of the participant's experiences in the fourth step. I compared themes across participants to gain an understanding and linked decision-making processes related to Internet marketing to small business owners' perceptions. Finally, according to Creswell's (2013) final step, I 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 the data is collected.

#### **Anticipated Themes/Perceptions**

Before beginning the data collection, I 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. I anticipated hearing that business owners had little to no knowledge of Internet marketing and how to utilize it. Additionally, there was an anticipation that rural small business owners' time would be a significant factor in not using Internet marketing. I also anticipated that the limited resources available in rural areas, caused by the geographic location and broadband access, would also be factors. Finally, I expected the age of some rural small business owners might play a significant role as to why they fail to use internet marketing.

#### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability is determined by its consistency and trustworthiness. According to Lietz et al. (2006), the following components are needed for a study to be con-

sidered trustworthy: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I used semi-structured interviews in this qualitative study to enhance reliability. I 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 me 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 me consisted of open-ended questions, which allowed the respondents to respond freely and helped me understand their experiences. According to Singer and Couper (2017), open-ended interview questions increase reliability because participants can describe their experiences and perspectives about internet marketing without being limited by researcher biases. I used member checking to enhance the study's reliability. I allowed the participants 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 the credibility of the findings (Lietz et al., 2006).

Triangulation, explanation of researcher bias, and data saturation will help enhance the validity of this qualitative study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I 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). I informed respondents of my knowledge and background in working with small business owners to indicate any bias potentially brought to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I used reflexive journaling during the study. Revealing personal biases in a written journal helped me discover and understand the lived experiences of the rural small business owners from their perspective, not allowing bias to overshadow the data analysis process (Stake, 2010). I interviewed participants until data saturation succeeded. Data saturation occurs when no new consistent data are 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. Triangulation and data saturation are directly related since triangulation is a method of reaching data saturation (Denzin, 2009).

#### **4. Application to Professional Practice, Findings, and Conclusions**

This study reflected on rural small business owners and the factors influencing 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.

However, challenges exist for small businesses for various reasons, and they are even more significant for those in rural areas.

This research showed that Internet marketing can be advantageous for rural small businesses in increasing the visibility of customer traffic and revenues. Internet marketing is an advertising channel that allows businesses 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 benefits of using them are more significant. Grubor and Jaksa (2018) pointed out that Internet marketing and modern technology have transformed how consumers interact, behave, communicate, and purchase from businesses. 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 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 that 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 that most small businesses do not have an internet marketing plan to help grow their businesses (Payne & Frow, 2006). The literature reviewed also showed that most small business owners 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 must 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 are shared in business operations, and small businesses prioritize their few resources. The findings of this study showed that internet marketing and advertising are often low on the priority list due to the factors identified, precisely time, capital, and personnel constraints. Reviewed literature suggests that 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). Small businesses must use technology to run more efficiently, allocate resources appropriately, and engage with customers. However, the findings showed that 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 that 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 significant factors that 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 explored several marketing concepts, including internet marketing, social media marketing, business exposure, marketing revenue generation, and factors influencing marketing decisions. According to [Shaltoni \(2017\)](#), small businesses' adoption of Internet marketing varies from those who use state-of-the-art websites and multiple social media platforms to those who use none. Findings supported business owners' various uses of Internet marketing and social media tools. Some owners had no presence at all, while others had a presence on Facebook but not on 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 \(2019\)](#), internet marketing in small businesses is an emerging tool for customer-focused marketing to maintain and grow customer relationships. 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.

#### **4.1. 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. I interviewed eight small business owners and the factors influencing the business owners' decision not to use or ineffectively use internet marketing as a marketing strategy. Six major themes were revealed that helped me address the stated research questions. The rural small business owners demonstrated an understanding of the value Internet marketing could bring and its impact on their small businesses. However, several factors hindered them from implementing Internet marketing. The findings revealed six primary factors influencing the business owner's decision not to use or ineffectively use Internet marketing: 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 knew 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. The small businesses would not change their geographic location; therefore, 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 critical factor that hindered these rural small business owners from entirely 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.

I assessed the fieldwork findings from the technology acceptance model and the resource-based view of the firm model. The technology acceptance model is critical 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 they impact their financial performance to achieve a competitive advantage (Alexy et al., 2018). I applied the theories to the rural small business owners in Sumter and Marengo counties in Alabama. I noted a connection between the responses received and the basis for both theories. The owners' current experience, comfort, knowledge level, and reluctance to accept technology, along with the resources available in terms of time, infrastructure, capital, and human resources, influence the decision of owners not to use or ineffectively use Internet marketing effectively.

#### **4.2. Recommendations for Further Action**

Based on this study's findings, I identified five recommendations for action: Rural small business owners should consider improving 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, identifying 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 and learn about platforms they can use and the features on those platforms to create an online presence. Research shows that online marketing has a broader market reach and is limitless regarding 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 locally and internation-

ally. 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 businesses and their target audience has two significant benefits. First, businesses have an opportunity to build their brand and reputation, allowing them to receive feedback from customers and respond to problems. As social networking sites evolve, small businesses should use 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 to set up and train small business owners on managing social media sites through student worker and internship programs.

As a result of the findings, I recommend that 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 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 (<https://www.sba.gov/>), the UWA's Small Business Development Center (<https://www.uwa.edu/>), the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce (<https://www.sumteralchamber.com/>), the Demopolis Area Chamber of Commerce (<https://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 that capital is a significant factor, and this confirmed the literature reviewed by Jaganathan et al. (2018), which suggested that 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 es-

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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 that nearly 92% of consumers rely on the Internet to obtain information about goods and services (Zickuhr et al., 2013). This point is crucial 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 using the platforms. Small business owners with some resources to hire additional personnel may consider hiring an intern who will provide cost savings compared to hiring a full-time professional. This would make 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), small business owners must learn and develop skills such as site optimization, monitoring, graphics manipulation, research, and analytics to sustain a vibrant online presence.

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 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 businesses and increase visibility, customer engagement, and customer satisfaction. Customers can enjoy more options from businesses they did not know existed, as well as the products or services they have to offer, and more engagement with small business owners through two-way conversations in an online environment.

Several methods existed I 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, articles will be published and presented 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, I identified areas for further study. First, further researchers can attempt to gain the perspective of more prominent 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 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, I 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 did not represent all races and ethnicities within the United States. Including individuals from different geographical locations, 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 that future studies 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.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

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 essential 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 problem addressed was the lack of internet marketing used by rural small business owners in 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-to-60-minute interview to help me uncover specific factors influencing 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 that all business owners interviewed were the primary decision-makers in their small businesses' marketing. Only half use the internet to support their small business operation daily. The findings also showed that participants had minimal knowledge of specific internet tools that could help market their small businesses in an automated fashion. The findings also showed that participants understood the various benefits and value of Internet marketing to their small businesses, specifically regarding visibility, customer traffic, and increased revenues. Participants also consistently agreed that 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 viewing available inventory. Finally, the findings showed that the significant factors influencing the owner's failure to use internet marketing were time constraints, capital and human resources, geographic location, age, reliable internet service, and understanding of social media tools and features.

This study's findings closed the literature gap related to factors influencing rural small business owners' 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 to their marketing strategy and create a plan to overcome them. 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

into the hands of customers.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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