Small and Micro Business Resources in the Post-Pandemic Period: A Perspective from Local Bridal Boutique Businesses in West Virginia

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Small and Micro Business Resources in the Post-Pandemic Period: A Perspective from Local Bridal Boutique Businesses in West Virginia

Ishtehar Sharif Swazan

Thesis submitted
to the Davis College of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Design
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Design and Merchandising

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Abstract

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Ishtehar Sharif Swazan

In widely dispersed small communities, local and regional businesses dominate West Virginia, an eastern state of the United States in the Appalachian Mountains where small and micro businesses constitute 98.9% of all businesses and contributes 49.1% of the state’s total employment. These businesses create jobs, help build a strong financial position for the state, and promote community-building and social activities. These businesses are unique as they sustain themselves while competing with national and regional retail chains and carving out a customer for themselves. However, the damage caused by the spread of Covid-19 is having a devastating effect on the small and micro businesses in the United States and the impact is much more severe in rural regions of the country. As small and micro businesses have a significant contribution to the socio-economic infrastructure of the rural state of West Virginia, it was necessary to identify the firm resources possessed by these businesses in the post-pandemic period. To achieve this objective, a content analysis of web-based self-description of the small and micro bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia and semi-structured qualitative interviews with owners/managers of those businesses were conducted. The results of this study identified the claimed and actual resources of these businesses. The findings also analyzed how the firm resources helped the local bridal boutiques in this post-pandemic period. The findings of this study might inform the federal and state decision-makers to make productive and worthwhile decisions to support the small and micro businesses in West Virginia.
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bridal boutiques in West Virginia
Chapter 1: Introduction

This chapter contains the following sections (a) small and micro businesses, (b) background of the study, (c) purpose of the study, and (d) significance of the study.

**Small and Micro Businesses**

Small and micro businesses (SMBs) constitute 99.9% of all United States businesses, playing an important role in the country's economy (SBA, 2020). SMBs provide opportunities for entrepreneurs, create jobs, foster local economies, and support local neighborhoods and communities. Therefore, SMBs are defined as the lifeblood that keeps the United States’ economy functioning. However, the true definition of SMB varies among industries, branches of government, and countries. The Small Business Administration (SBA) looks at the size, industry, and annual receipts of the business to determine if it is a small business or not. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) classifies a small business as a business that generates less than 10 million dollars per year in revenue (IRS, 2017). On the other hand, The United States Congress defines small businesses as privately-owned entities where the business owners and partners make the decisions for the direction of the business (Layman, 2016). In general, small businesses are defined as businesses that have no more than 500 employees and regenerate less than 10 million dollars per year (Hanf & Soetendorp, 2014; IRS, 2017).

Meanwhile, micro-businesses are commonly defined as businesses with five or fewer employees including the owner (Association for Enterprise Opportunity, 2019). By definition, micro businesses can be viewed as a subset of the "small business"; i.e., every micro business is a small business, but every small business is not a micro business. However, micro businesses are not the same as small businesses because financing and marketing are more of an issue for micro businesses as they operate with less financial capital and human resources. Micro businesses also
have a specific consumer base usually smaller in size compared to small businesses (Church & Oakley, 2018). As a result, these businesses are the most affected in the time of crisis where crisis is defined as an unexpected event that causes stress, requires intervention, and mandates proper planning to ensure survival and sustainability in business. These unplanned events may develop from natural disasters, terrorist activities, human error, or defective machinery.

**Background of the Study**

The world we live in today is currently encountering the Covid-19 pandemic which has touched and changed the lives of people worldwide (Mason, Narcum & Mason, 2021). The pandemic also brought the world economy to a standstill including the United States, the largest economy in the world (Bai, Quayson & Sarkis, 2021). Offices, markets, and businesses had to be closed as per the order of the government (Hoekstra & Leeflang, 2020; Ding & Li, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the people's lifestyles, ways of working, outdoor activities, and most importantly, changed the consumer’s shopping behavior which affected the SMBs across the United States (Mason, Narcum & Mason, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic had a harsher impact on all the SMBs as the structure of these businesses and their constrained resources make them vulnerable to any economic disruptions (Aladejebi, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic had a much more devastating impact on SMBs in rural regions where businesses have fewer resources and consumer has less disposable income (Gherhes, Vorley & Brooks, 2020). Although SMBs have a low-scale production and generate less revenue compared to larger businesses, these businesses have made a strong position with their innovative strategies, enhanced customer service, and planning techniques (Mokhtar, 2013).
Being a rural Appalachian region, West Virginia's economy has been weaker over the past few decades when compared to the whole nation. The state's comparative labor market performance has been even weaker compared to its neighboring states (Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland) (Young, 2021). Among all businesses in West Virginia, 98.9% are SMBs which contribute 49.1% of the state's total employment (Small Business Profile, 2020). Several studies (Bartik, et al., 2020; Fairlie, 2020; Bloom, Fletcher, & Yeh, 2021) have investigated the impact of this Covid-19 pandemic on SMBs across the United States but there is no research available on the firm resources of the SMBs during the post-pandemic period in West Virginia and how these resources are helping these SMBs to regain their competitive advantage.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to identify the firm resources possessed by the SMBs in West Virginia in the post-pandemic period where firm resources can be defined as the available factors or inputs, both tangible and intangible such as assets, capabilities, firm attributes, information, and knowledge which are owned or controlled by a firm. Additionally, the study analyzed the role of these firm resources on achieving competitive advantage. This study was focused on the local bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia as a part of SMB.

The bridal boutique business is one of the most popular and fascinating businesses in West Virginia as the people of this mountain state love to have a big fancy wedding from a historical and cultural perspective (Rice & Brown, 1993). One major reason for this was the booming economy in this region for the coal mining during the late 1800s when Congress granted statehood to West Virginia. This makes the consumers of this state able to afford big programs as the state's economy was prospering. There are small bridal boutique stores in almost every community in West Virginia.
providing a variety of clothing options for the future brides and bridegrooms. Therefore, the study aimed to find answers to the three broad research questions.

**Research Questions:**

a. What are the key resources that small and micro bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia claim to have?

b. What are the actual firm resources that these businesses have and how are these resources helping the local bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia to regain their competitive advantage during this post-pandemic period?

c. What were the discrepancies between the claimed and actual resources?

**Significance of the Study**

SMBs have been playing a significant role in the United States economy. There are 31.7 million SMBs in the United States (SBA, 2020) and the potential growth of SMBs is vital for the economic prosperity of any individual as well as for the nation (Lewis, & Churchill, 1983; Gherhes, Vorley & Brooks, 2020). Although it is not the primary engine of growth, the SMBs are helping the country with broad-based development and basic household economic survival (Walcott, Kamal, & Qureshi, 2008). SMBs are also considered a means to financial independence and success as the United States transforms from traditional factory jobs to the various categories of jobs (Mattare, Monahan, & Shah, 2011). SMBs have provided employment for 60.6 million people in the United States which is 47.1% of all United States employees (SBA, 2020). Moreover, the establishment of SMBs stimulates economic activity by establishing businesses, creating employment, and investing in opportunities. However, the SMBs always remain at high risk of any sudden crisis due to less financial capital or a lack of business continuity plans (Aladejebi, 2020).
SMBs also provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to establish their own businesses, which creates jobs for local people, and gives hope to the local and national manufacturers (Gherhes, Vorley & Brooks, 2020). Although operating a small business involves taking a lot of risks, the establishment of SMBs is crucial for any local region and its people. The money spent by consumers on local SMBs is used to pay the salaries of the employees who are mostly local people. So, eventually, the money stays in the community. The more money people spend on local SMBs, the more support the community gets (Mattare, Monahan, & Shah, 2011). In a region with a low population, SMBs are the only businesses that can survive. While in regions with larger populations, SMBs are the only businesses that offer specialized and divergent products. SMBs are also considered beneficial in every community for their ability to respond quickly to changing economic environments as they have few employees to manage and a customer-oriented policy. Therefore, identifying the key resources for SMBs is really important specifically in West Virginia, where SMBs contributed 49% of the employment in 2020 (Das, 2020; Small Business Profile, 2020).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents the related literature used in this study. This chapter contains the following sections (a) history of small and micro businesses, (b) small and micro businesses in West Virginia, (c) impact of covid-19 on the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia, (d) conceptual framework: resource-based theory, and (e) small and micro business resources including the bridal boutiques.

History of Small and Micro Businesses

After the second world war, the national economy of the United States was falling down which was leading to a recession. About two million soldiers who were in the world war suddenly become unemployed when they came back from the war (Adkins, 2002; Blackford, 2003). The government of the United States was trying to develop its agricultural sector by providing entrepreneurship opportunities for unemployed soldiers. But eventually, the service sector overtook the agricultural sector with a comparatively large and educated labor force and a big consumer group (Davis, Haltiwanger & Schuh, 1996). Entrepreneurs in the service sector started with small businesses with fewer than 20 employees (Brock & Evans, 1989). These entrepreneurs had no choice but to keep their businesses small for several reasons. First of all, the transportation facility was inadequate and inefficient at that time period (Blackford, 2003). Business owners had a hard time transporting their products from suppliers or vendors. Second, the conditions of financial institutions such as banks, insurance, and investment agency were not solvent enough to support the growing small businesses (Davis, Haltiwanger & Schuh, 1996). Entrepreneurs hardly got any financial support from those financial institutions to convert their small businesses into large enterprises. Lastly, the production capacity of those small businesses was significantly lower as there was an insufficient supply of raw materials, water, and energy (Morrison, Breen & Ali, 2003).
To support these small businesses, the government established Small Business Administration (SBA) in 1953. The purpose of this institution was (Blackford, 2003)

- To provide training to small business entrepreneurs.
- To protect the interests of the small business entrepreneurs by assisting them financially
- To provide an additional or special support for the small businesses in rural regions across the United States where the development rate is low
- To provide all small businesses throughout the country an opportunity to buy surplus government land on sale
- To support small businesses that were impacted by any kind of natural disaster by giving them an interest-free loan
- To encourage more individuals and families to become a small business entrepreneur

The establishment of SBA was a success at that time as it helped to create more businesses across the United States. It helped the existing small business to grow with time by giving them training on market strategy, sales, and product promotion (Blackford, 2003; Morrison, Breen & Ali, 2003). In 1982, the United States government highlighted the development of innovative entrepreneurship and implemented the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) Program for the growth of small businesses (Public Law 97-219) (Brock & Evans, 1989; Davis, Haltiwanger & Schuh, 1996). Several other organizations also helped the SMBs in the United States to grow with time. Some of them are the United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (USASBE) and the International Council for Small Business (ICSB) which assisted the small businesses with R&D support, financial support, and training services.
Present Condition

It is universally agreed upon that SMBs are vital to a nation's economy and nation's competitiveness (Mills & McCarthy, 2016; Zeuli, & O'Shea, 2017). Small businesses can have a significant impact on future business growth, job creation, competitiveness, innovation, and economic growth. Additionally, micro businesses are also recognized as a poverty mitigation strategy or an effective tool to supplement income (Hoy, Romero, & Zeuli, 2012). Since joblessness creates an extreme financial burden on federal and state programs, scholars believe that SMBs are the answer to global economic sustainability (Nicholson, Needels, & Hock, 2014; Cowling, Liu, Ledger, & Zhang, 2015).

There are 30.7 million SMBs within the United States which is 99.9% of all United States businesses (SBA, 2020). Additionally, SMBs make up the majority of the United States employment sector and are the primary source of new job creation (Dahmen & Rodríguez, 2014; Beall & Morris, 2015; Hatten, 2015). In 2016, SMB employed 59.9 million workers in the United States which is 47.3% of the total private workforce (SBA, 2020). On an annual basis, SMBs generates approximately 63% of new employment opportunities within the U.S. and these businesses account for two out of three new jobs (Wolff, Pett, and Ring, 2015). On the other hand, the formation of SMBs also stimulates economic activity by establishing businesses, creating employment, and investing in opportunities, as well as improving productivity through new ideas, technologies, and innovations (Christie & Sjoquist, 2012).

Small and Micro Businesses in West Virginia

West Virginia is one of the nation's most rural states. The GDP of West Virginia was USD 73,709 million in 2020 and ranked 45th among all states (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2021). Also, the
labor force participation rate was the lowest among all US states at just over 55 percent in 2019 (Lego et al., 2021). The lagging economic development negatively affects the economic and social well-being of West Virginia's rural population, the health of its local businesses, and the ability of its local government to provide basic human services. The state's comparative labor market performance has been even weaker compared to its neighboring states (Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Maryland). But after the recession in mid-2016, the state has developed a strong pace of economic growth that has reduced the performance gap with the nation and neighboring states (Lego, Deskins, Bowen & Atkinson, 2018). Manufacturing, retailing, mining, and tourism are the major economic sectors in West Virginia.

Widely dispersed small communities with relatively small local and regional markets dominate West Virginia (Lego, Deskins, Bowen & Atkinson, 2018). The businesses that serve these markets also tend to be small. Among all the businesses in West Virginia, 98.9% are SMBs. Firms with fewer than 20 employees have the largest share of small business employment. SMBs in West Virginia have created employment opportunities for 269,789 people which contributes 49.1% of the state's total employment (United States Census Bureau, 2020). In the fourth quarter of 2018, 932 businesses were established, generating 3,323 new jobs in West Virginia. SMBs created 4,270 new jobs in 2019. Firms employing fewer than 20 employees experienced the largest gains, adding 3,005 new jobs. So, SMBs are considered an important part of every community across West Virginia. In fact, SMBs are the biggest businesses in West Virginia. These businesses create jobs and provide new opportunities to promote community-building and social activities.

**Bridal Boutique Business**

Wedding is one of the biggest industries in the United States, with an estimated value of 70 billion USD in 2010 (Howard, 2010). The magnitude and diverse nature of the bridal market today, with
a wide range of businesses that cater to this market, indicating the consumer's readiness to spend a large sum of money on their weddings. Simply put, Americans love big weddings. However, this has not always been the case. Earlier in the nineteenth century, a wedding was not a consumer rite but rather a communal celebration of marriage. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a range of businesses were providing services and goods for the celebration of the middle class and elite nuptials which changed the market for bridal-related businesses. Among the bridal-related businesses, bridal boutiques are considered one of the major businesses as the bridal dress has become the biggest priority for any bride (Howard, 2008).

Every bride wants to look exquisite and unique, and a bridal gown is considered one of the most important symbols of the bride's specialness. Whether or not the gown is white, the emotion expressed through the gown is the 'fairy tale' or 'princess' wedding dress. The widely held view in Western culture is that the wedding day is the bride's day to shine (Sykes & Jan, 2015). However, bridal dresses tend to be very expensive mainly because of the individual alteration service and the use of intricate raw materials such as genuine silk, chantilly, and venice laces (Park & Suh, 2006).

Bridal boutiques are one of the most popular businesses in West Virginia. From a historical perspective, people of this state tend to have a big fancy weddings (Rice & Brown, 1993). Brides and bridegrooms shop at bridal boutique stores, consult with in-store designers, employ dressmakers/seamstresses, or purchase readymade bridal wear for their wedding (Gebremariam, Gebremedhin & Jackson, 2004). There are local bridal boutique stores in almost every community in West Virginia, offering a variety of bridal dresses for the brides, bridegrooms, bridesmaids, and mother of the bride. The bridal boutiques offer wide range of clothing options for the brides to make their wedding day even more special (Sykes & Jan, 2015). They carry products from various
top designer brands to fulfill the wish of their customers. Along with the products, they also provide excellent customer service which makes them unique. The bridal boutiques in West Virginia can be characterized as small or micro businesses with limited financial capital and human resources (Hanf & Soetendorp, 2014; IRS, 2017).

**Impact of Covid-19 on Bridal Boutique Businesses in West Virginia**

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused massive economic damage to most SMBs in the United States. All the businesses had to temporarily shut down their operations as per the orders from the government. Meanwhile, many SMBs permanently closed their operations due to a lack of profit and inability to pay the rent and utilities of the store. The scenario was not different for the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. The state governor declared a state of emergency on March 16, 2020, and announced the temporary closure of all businesses (Office of the Governor, 2020). The pandemic not only affected the businesses but also impacted the people working there. The number of full-time employees declined by a significant number during the first three months of the spread of Covid-19 in 2020 (Humphries, Neilson & Ulyssea, 2020). Owners/managers of all SMBs in West Virginia had to lay off their employees in order to cut down their costs and the state lost around 94,000 jobs (Young, 2021). Then, the governor of West Virginia announced the reopening of businesses with limitations on May 18, 2020 (Office of the Governor, 2020). These limitations included a limited number of customers inside the store, short business hours, and proper sanitization of the store (Office of the Governor, 2020).

Most SMB owners/managers including the bridal boutique business needed financial support from the government to run businesses in this situation. The government passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to support these businesses (Humphries, Neilson & Ulyssea, 2020; Katare, Marshall & Valdivia, 2021). But most the businesses were severely
impacted by this pandemic before the CARES Act was passed (Humphries, Neilson & Ulyssea, 2020). Moreover, businesses had less awareness during the initial stage of this pandemic, and as a result, they have missed out on initial Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funds (Humphries, Neilson & Ulyssea, 2020). Additionally, the impact of this pandemic varied across industries, and it was difficult to identify which businesses needed the most support. Research (Bartik, et al., 2020; Kalogiannidis, 2020) shows that businesses such as retail, arts and entertainment, personal services, food services, and hospitality all have reportedly declined their employment by half (Fairlie, 2020). SMBs that had a previously established online platform were less impacted due to this pandemic (Bartik, et al., 2020; Bloom, Fletcher, & Yeh, 2021).

The effect of this pandemic was much more severe on the bridal boutiques as there were no physical weddings since the beginning of the spread of Covid-19. Those who got married during this pandemic had to get married on Zoom or have a small ceremony with only the family members (Sinrich, 2021). As there was no wedding, there were no customers for the bridal dress. Buying a bridal dress has taken a total 180-degree shift and for several months’ appointments were not even allowed at most bridal dress stores due to mandatory shop closures. As these businesses fully rely on the in-person shopping experience, it was hard for them to sell online. Also, rules and restrictions were in place to keep staff and guests safe when the businesses reopened. All the brides had to answer pre-screening questions. Additionally, the number of guests allowed at an appointment has been greatly reduced. However, with change comes innovation and the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia have been developing new ways to stay connected with the customers such as hiring experienced designers or consultants, developing 3D models for their dresses, and employing more staff to provide a personalized shopping experience (Gallahan, 2020). As these businesses have a significant impact on the socio-economic development of West
Virginia, it was necessary to understand the firm resources possessed by these local bridal boutiques during this post-pandemic period, as weddings have resumed. Mainly because these firm resources will help to determine the success of these local bridal boutiques by achieving competitive advantage in local or regional market.

**Conceptual Framework: Resource-Based Theory (RBT)**

Firm resources can be defined as the available factors or inputs, both tangible and intangible such as assets, capabilities, organizational values, firm attributes, information, and knowledge that are owned or controlled by a firm (Barney 1991; Barney, Ketchen & Wright, 2011). These resources help a firm to implement innovative strategies and business planning, which improve the firm's efficiency and effectiveness. The Resource-Based Theory (RBT) of the firm focus on the firm's internal resources and attributes to figure out how a firm differentiates itself from other firms and achieves sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Barney, Ketchen & Wright, 2011; Shibin, Dubey, Gunasekaran, Hazen, Roubaud, Gupta & Foropon, 2020). A firm's ability to develop unique and distinctive resources assists its ability to adjust to the changing business environment and improves its survival prospects. The Resource-based theory is widely known as one of the most prominent frameworks for analyzing, explaining, and predicting organizational relationships (Shan, Luo, Zhou & Wei, 2019).

Resource-based theory mainly emphasizes the firm-level resources as a way to gain sustained competitive advantage (Shan, Luo, Zhou & Wei, 2019). An individual firm can be seen as a unique bundle of resources that are developed and expanded over time. Resources can be both tangible and intangible (Alvarez & Busenitz, 2001; Shibin et al., 2020). Tangible resources are the physical and financial values of a firm whereas intangible are the non-physical factors of a firm. Intangible resources can be further categorized into two categories: (a) asset; which means something that
the firm has and (b) skill or capability; which means something that the firm does. According to Barney (1991), resources that are valuable, rare, difficult to imitate, and non-substitutable are considered to be sources of sustained competitive advantage. Barney (1991) also mentioned three key resources that assist firms to gain and sustain competitive advantage in any business environment setting and these key resources are

1. Physical capital resources: physical technology used in a firm such as modern automatic machines, firm's plant and equipment, firm's location and access to raw material.
2. Human capital resources: training for employees, business or marketing innovation, experience, decision-making process, relationships within the business, insights of managers and workers.
3. Organizational capital resources: firm's production and planning, controlling and coordinating systems, and the relationship between various groups inside the firm.

Enz (2008) further extended this theory and established five firm resources for achieving competitive advantage. These are:

1. Financial resources: which includes all monetary resources such as cash, dedicated business checking accounts, and holdings of stocks.
2. Physical resources: which includes physical assets such as land, buildings, machines, property etc.
3. Human resources: which includes employee skills, employee educational qualification, and training.
4. Organizational knowledge and learning resources: which includes consumer satisfaction, fast delivery of products, and visual merchandising.
general organizational resources: which includes company's reputation, brand value, any kind of patents, and relation with external stakeholders.

The resource-based theory framework has been used in many studies to identify the key resources of any business. This framework was also used in fashion and apparel business studies to analyze the competitive advantages achieved because of the firm resources. Luo, Fan, & Han (2012) studied the relationship between information technology (IT) and organizational capabilities using the resource-based view (RBV) to investigate how IT allows the apparel businesses in the United States to gain competitive advantages. Chang & Ha-Brookshire (2011) studied the apparel businesses in China, and Das & Ha-Brookshire (2014) studied the Indian apparel exporting businesses using the resource-based theory of the firm framework to identify the resources of this sector.

Small and Micro Business Resources including Bridal Boutiques

Researchers (Dutta & Thornhill, 2014; Huggins & Thompson, 2015) found that business owner's skills and characteristics are vital resources for SMBs meaning that a small or micro business owner should know specific areas such as financial literacy, funding negotiations, and business planning. Business owners also need to be innovative to survive and sustain a competitive advantage. Additionally, access to financial capital and availability of human capital is other two resources that play a vital role in small or micro business growth (Bates & Robb, 2016).

Networking can be defined as the ability to make contact and exchange information with other people or businesses to develop or build relationships or to access and share information. It is another resource that helps SMBs to grow and sustain which can be achieved through establishing a business website, having social media pages, and conducting outdoor marketing campaigns
Networking helps SMBs in building relationships with consumers as well as other businesses. Networking allows SMBs to establish trust, and empathy and helps to connect businesses that share common grounds for values, beliefs, and interests (Foley, Edwards, & Schlenker, 2014). It provides SMBs with greater access to a larger number of customers, vendors, and investors (Sigmund, Semrau, and Wegner, 2015). Moreover, networking not only increases the financial performance of SMBs but also increases the overall business performance.

Social capital on the other hand comprises the value of social relationships and networks which complement the economic capital for the economic growth of an organization. It is also considered a resource for SMBs. Social capital stresses the importance of social networks, and relationships and aims to use them in the best possible way for achieving organizational goals (Foley, Edwards, & Schlenker, 2014).

Business planning is another resource that allows SMBs to strategically plan how they should utilize their resources in order to stay competitive within their market. Business planning can assist SMBs to adapt to the rapidly changing business environment and reduce mistakes that could be costly (Babafemi, 2015). Additionally, the combination of the business owner and other business leaders can be described as a business association that contributes towards the growth of the business and influences the retention of quality employees. It is also one of the important resources for SMBs as this helps in the production of useful products and services while establishing a good relationship with their customer base (Jaskiewicz, Block, Miller, & Combs, 2014). So, quality of service served as a significant resource in the survival of SMBs (Ostrom et al., 2015; Snyder et al., 2016).
The SMB owners in rural areas need to know the industry in which they are conducting business as they have a limited number of consumers and also have limited resources. So, without having adequate knowledge about the specific business, it would not be possible to grab the market share. Researchers (Njaramba & Ngugi, 2014) have found that industry-specific education is a predominate qualitative indicator for the growth and survival of SMBs, especially in rural regions. Knowing about the business environment and resources is considered a must for any SMB especially in rural regions or in small communities. Otherwise, businesses in those regions will not survive due to a lack of business skills and inadequate knowledge about business resources (Njaramba and Ngugi, 2014).
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter presents the research methods used in the study. This chapter contains the following sections (a) qualitative content analysis, (b) qualitative interview, (c) sample selection, (d) data analysis strategy, (e) data storage, and (f) validation strategies. Sections (a) and (b) define the study's research methodology. Sections (c), (d), and (e) describe the process of sample selection, data analysis, and data storage. The last section (e) describes the validation strategies used in this study. The qualitative content analysis was used to identify the resources claimed by the local bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. The qualitative interview was used to identify the actual firm resources of these businesses and to analyze how these firm resources helped the local bridal boutique businesses to achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Additionally, interviews were used to analyze any discrepancies between the claimed and actual resources.

Design of the Study

This section explains the appropriateness of using qualitative content analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews as a research design for this study. Merriam (2002) defines qualitative research as a multi-method focus involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. The objective of qualitative research seeks depth rather than breadth; focusing on smaller samples; learning about how and why people behave and think the way they do and discovering rather than verifying theory or process (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Qualitative research produces findings in non-statistical or otherwise quantifiable means (Merriam (2002). Qualitative content analysis can be used to find patterns in how concepts are conveyed to different types of target audiences (Neuendorf, 2016). This method is used in a wide range of fields from marketing to social science disciplines. Qualitative interview, on the other hand, is used to
explore the research subject's opinion, behavior, and experience to better understand the phenomenon (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

Determining research methodology depends upon several factors, including the study's objectives, the type of research questions asked, and the data analysis techniques used (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). Researchers suggest that the mixing of two approaches maximizes the strengths of both methodologies (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007). In an attempt to seek convergence across both methods, Creswell & Creswell (2005) felt that biases inherent to each approach could be neutralized by triangulating data sources. Using multiple methods includes more than simply collecting and analyzing both kinds of data. It involves using both approaches in tandem so that the overall strength of the study exceeds either content analysis or qualitative interview research alone. Several published studies merged qualitative content analysis and semi-structured qualitative interview methods (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Nilsson, Nyberg, & Strombergsson, 2021). The study by Nilsson, Nyberg, & Strombergsson, (2021) suggests multiple research techniques, such as the focus group interviews, can serve as a valuable adjunct to qualitative content analysis in identifying children's reactions toward speech sound disorders in other children and whether these reactions can be related to specific speech characteristics.

In this study, a multiple method research design has been used. Collection and analysis of qualitative content analysis data occurred first, followed by qualitative interview data collection and analysis. Additionally, the interpretation phase integrated data from both methods. Evidence from previous studies suggests that interviews and content analysis research combined can serve as an effective research methodology (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). Therefore, to collect the broadest range of information possible and confirm findings from different data sources, this study utilizes the multiple methods research design (Creswell, 2003).
Qualitative Content Analysis

The study aimed to identify the firm resources claimed by the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia in the post-pandemic period. To achieve this research goal, the study used qualitative content analysis as a first step to explore the firm resources claimed by the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. Content analysis can be described as a systematic and replicable approach used to analyze text and visuals and convert it into easy and understandable content categories (Forman, & Damschroder, 2007; Neuendorf, 2016). The content analysis research approach aimed to investigate the communicative material, especially from the mass media and targets the formal characteristics and latent meaning of the content (Mayring, 2004; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this method, texts are considered a rich source of data with great potential to disclose valuable information about a particular case (Stemler, 2000; Selvi, 2019). Because of its versatile nature, this method is vastly used in educational research.

A content analysis of the publicly available self-described web data was conducted to identify the claimed resources of the bridal boutique business in West Virginia in this post-pandemic period. During the pandemic, websites became the only way for all businesses, including the bridal boutique businesses to reach their consumers. Moreover, a website is the easiest way for any business to market its products online, and it provides much more credibility for a business than any other social media platform (George, Mirsadikov & Mennecke, 2016; Viviani & Pasi, 2017). Businesses that didn't have their own website had to create a new one and those who had one had to update during this pandemic. These websites became the major platform for all SMBs to represent their strength, strategies, and competitive advantages. That is why this study adopted the content analysis methodology to identify the firm resources claimed by the bridal boutique businesses on their website. The content analysis of the business's self-description included
business history, mission and vision, marketing strategy and policies, competitive advantages, and future goals. Individual business websites were chosen for this study as individual website represents specific business identities and tells a lot about their business policies (Argenti & Forman, 2003). Also, these individual websites are open access, meaning these are publicly available. Content analysis also has applications in visual images and auditory files however, this study primarily focuses on the analysis of textual content.

Qualitative Interview

The qualitative interview was used as the second step to identify the actual firm resources and to analyze how these firm resources of the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia helping to achieve and sustain competitive advantage. Additionally, the interview findings were used to observe any discrepancies between claimed resources and actual resources. Qualitative research interviews were used for this study mainly to understand any specific phenomena from the human point of view and try to unfold the meaning of people's experiences (Turner, 2010). Qualitative interviews allow a researcher to obtain valuable data that is quite impossible to collect from surveys or observation (Rogers, 2008). The results of the qualitative content analysis helped in framing the qualitative interview questions. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with the bridal boutique business owners and managers in West Virginia as individual in-depth interviews can inform a wide range of research questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The interview questions were created in a way so that it can focus on the participant's experiences with the topic.

The in-depth interviews followed a semi-structured format rather than a structured or unstructured format. This is because structured interviews do not allow for full exploration of individual perspectives and circumstances of its rigid structure which can reduce the opportunities for
interviewees to provide real and meaningful information (Rogers, 2008). On the other hand, unstructured interviews don't follow any fixed questionnaire which makes it difficult to compare responses between participants (Rogers, 2008; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). In a semi-structured format, the interviewee has a fair degree of freedom in what to talk about and how much (Tavory, 2020). Also, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to prepare questionnaires before the interview to lead the conversation and encourage two-way communication (Jones, 2020). The interview questions were open-ended guided by the results of content analysis which emphasized aspects such as business skills, business resources, and government policies during the pandemic and their general opinion

**Sample Selection**

**Content Analysis**

The Reference USA database was used to acquire a list of bridal businesses operating in West Virginia. (ReferenceUSA, 2021). Researchers has been using this database for many years to get information on United States' businesses (Davis & Daley, 2008; Baron & Tang, 2011; Chetty et. al., 2020). The list of bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia was obtained through an advance search option in the Reference USA database by choosing the location/state: West Virginia, number of employees: less than 500, major industry/group: retail trade sector, and lastly selecting category 56: apparel & accessories store from the retail trade sector. A total of 851 businesses were found from that advanced search. Each business was then analyzed individually to identify if it qualifies into the bridal business category. Table I provides the inclusion and exclusion criteria.
Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria for sample selection.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Criteria</th>
<th>Exclusion Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code: 5621-04 (Bridal Shops)</td>
<td>Not falls under the SIC code for bridal businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses Type: private; that are locally owned</td>
<td>Business type: Brunch of public company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If any local business has a branch, that needs to be within West Virginia</td>
<td>Businesses that are retail chain shops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business that has a website</td>
<td>Businesses that do not have a website</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A total of 31 bridal businesses were identified in the Reference USA database using this criterion. Each business was checked for a valid website and only 25 businesses were found to have a proper website that describes their company details.

**Qualitative Interviews**

For the qualitative interview, the 25 bridal boutique businesses were contacted after getting approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Protocol: 2204555136). Participants for this study were the managers or owners of those bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. The researcher contacted the participants in person, by email, and through phone calls to get an appointment for the interview. Among the 25 businesses, 4 agreed to participate in the interview. Interviews were conducted with the participants in April 2022 on the business premises with the permission of the interviewees. Table II shows the participants and interview information. Each interview lasted for approximately 40 min to 60 min in length and was recorded with the interviewee's consent. Following the IRB guidelines, no personal identifier questions were asked during the interviews. Pseudo names were given for the participants and their businesses.
Table 2: Participants and interview information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Years of Operation</th>
<th>No. of Employee</th>
<th>Interview Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>ABC Bridal Store</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>47 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>BCD Bridal Shop</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>36 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>CDE Bridal Boutique</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ava</td>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>DEF Bridal Boutique Shop</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>59 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis Strategy**

**Coding for Content Analysis**

Codes are considered the currency of content analysis. Researchers can systematically and rigorously categorize and interpret vast amounts of text through the coding process (Basit, 2003). Codes themselves can be defined as short, descriptive labels that indicate a salient meaning to more than one unit of text (Deterding & Waters, 2021). It is important for the researcher to be fully immersed in the data for establishing proper codes. This can be achieved through several readings of the text which help a researcher to become familiar with the scope of the data and bring innovative ideas about coding (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). If a study has a proper theoretical framework, then codes can be established using that framework or related literature. Otherwise, codes can be established during the analysis process for a study which doesn't have an existing framework (Deterding & Waters, 2021). As the study adopted the resource-based theory of the firm as the framework, codes were created from analyzing the websites according to that theory.

A business's online presence, particularly a website, can have a massive impact on its success. Businesses use the content on their websites to communicate and advertise their products and services which helps to increase their credibility and attract prospective customers (Mitchell,
That is the major reason why websites are considered a vital way to identify a business's resources that they are showcasing to their consumers. The text data under "About Us", "Business Information", "Know Us", "Business History", "Services", "Our Brides", and "Events" section of each bridal boutique business website was analyzed during February 2022 to March 2022. The analyzed text data was then used for coding purposes.

The coding system was developed in a way so that the key resources of the bridal boutique businesses can be identified from the text data and coded as a unique theme following the Enz (2008) framework. For example, the text data of "Covid-19 safety tool" were coded into a unique theme of "safety/sanitization equipment", text data of "first place in a contest" were coded into "awards", and text data of "has been serving the Tri-State area for 70 years" were coded into "location" and "experience". After theme development, each unique theme was classified into the five overall firm resource categories proposed by Enz (2008). For example, if a business described that it has been providing high-quality products, has a competitive price, and take private appointment then these resources were classified under the organizational knowledge and learning resource category. Land and building, equipment, location, size, and domestic operations were coded under the physical resource category. The human resource category contains skillful employees, designers, training programs, and internship opportunities. Business experience and reputation fall into general organizational resources. All monetary related resources were coded under the financial resource category.

**Interview Transcript Analysis**

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using the Microsoft word transcribe feature and then coded. The software allowed the researcher to annotate the text, code the text, search for keywords, and organize the text. In keeping with the accepted protocol for qualitative data analysis,
the transcription process began with the author examining each transcript and then identifying 
commonalities and differences across the transcripts (Hagens, Dobrow, & Chafe, 2009; McGrath, 
Palmgren & Liljedahl, 2019; Tavory, 2020). The coding process followed an open coding strategy 
to make sure that all the relevant information is analyzed properly. A cyclic process of breaking 
up the data and arranging the data together into themes eventually helped to establish patterns and 
corresponding categories. Analysis of the data and arranging of the data together into themes were 
done based on the theoretical perspectives (Nash, 2019; Arrigo, 2021). The themes were then used 
to structure the overall interpretation.

Data Storage

All the data for this study both audio recordings of the interviews and the transcripts were stored 
appropriately according to the storage protocols mentioned by the IRB. The researcher used a 
password-protected thumb drive to store interview data as data confidentiality and participant 
privacy considerations are critical components of a research protocol. There were no duplicate soft 
copies made from the original source and no data was transferred into hard copy. Therefore, there 
is no evidence of physical documents that need to be destroyed.

Validation Strategies

Positionality Statement

The term positionality can be defined as an individual's world view or how he/she observes the 
world events from their perspective. Additionally, positionality also describes how an individual 
adopt a research task and its social and political context (Milner, 2007). The individual’s worldview 
means where the researcher is coming from, and it depends on several assumptions. First, 
ontological assumptions which mean an individual's beliefs about the nature of social reality and
what is knowable about the world. Second, epistemological assumptions meaning an individual’s beliefs about the nature of knowledge. Third, assumptions about how an individual interacts with their environment and relate to it (Holmes, 2020).

I have completed my undergraduate in Textile engineering with a major in apparel manufacturing technology in Bangladesh. My undergraduate studies in Bangladesh have exposed me to a stimulating academic environment where I learned about apparel manufacturing, merchandising, and marketing. I was fascinated by the global apparel industry and wanted to know more about merchandising and marketing strategies in the apparel business, supply chain management, and entrepreneurship. I took courses related to apparel merchandising and marketing and this helped me to enhance my knowledge of this topic.

The Master of Science degree at West Virginia University (WVU) has provided me with advanced knowledge about merchandising and marketing, small and micro business, fashion consumer behavior, retailing, human resource management, and research theories in the apparel business field. Along with the MS degree program, the graduate certificate in Business Data Analysis helped me to learn diverse techniques to formulate and solve business problems and assist in business decisions making. I was introduced to the research opportunities in the fashion and apparel industry as a graduate research assistant at the Fashion Dress and Merchandising department. My previous research study was also on the small and micro business field, and this helped me to gain a better understanding about the small and micro businesses in the United States. My academic background and research experience positions me as an "insider" as I can connect with the participants for this study and share common knowledge of small and micro business resources. However, being a Bangladeshi citizen and student of apparel manufacturing has given me the opportunity to be an outsider as I experienced a different social, cultural, political, and
economic environment in the United States. I believe that my dual positionality role in my research provided me with many benefits such as the participants were very comfortable with me during the whole interview as I shared common knowledge with them. This helped me to get an honest and practical answer which enables me to get the actual view of bridal boutique businesses and to draw a better conclusion of my research.

**Participant's Feedback**

Participant's feedback helped me to do an external check of the validity of the data and the interpretations. The summary of the interview results was sent via email, along with the results to three participants asking for their comments and feedback. Because of the busy schedules of the participants, only one participant replied that the results are similar to their description. As the emails were sent to three participants, the researcher is still expecting to get the participant's feedback within the next few days.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of this study. This chapter contains the following sections (a) findings from content analysis, and (b) findings from qualitative interview.

Findings from Content Analysis

Sample Analysis

Collectively, 25 bridal boutique business websites were analyzed for the study to identify the firm resources claimed by these businesses. The study revealed that these 25 bridal boutique stores were located in 15 different counties of West Virginia. The highest number of bridal stores (5) were found in Monongalia County specifically in Morgantown which is the home of West Virginia University and considered a college town. The second most stores (3) were located in Kanawha County specifically in Charleston which is the capital of West Virginia. There were two bridal stores located in each of the following Counties: Marshall, Berkeley, Cabell, and Harrison. The rest of the nine bridal stores were located in Mineral, Putnam, Wood, Lewis, Nicholas, Greenbrier, Brooke, Wayne, and Upshur County.

The data showed that eight bridal stores (32 percent) have a business experience of 0 to 10 years and eight bridal stores (32 percent) have more than 30 years. Six bridal stores (24 percent) have an experience of 11 to 20 years. Only three (12 percent) have an experience of 21 to 30 years. The data also showed that thirteen bridal boutique businesses (52 percent) have five or less than five employees which categorizes them into micro businesses according to the definition. Nine (36 percent) have more than 5 and less than 500 employees which are categorized into small businesses. Employee data wasn't available for three businesses (12 percent). The sales volume data highlighted eleven bridal boutique businesses (44 percent) have an annual sale of less than
$500,000 and seven businesses (28 percent) have an annual sale of greater than $500,000. The data on sales volume was not found for six businesses (24 percent). Table III provides a description of the study samples.

Table 3: Sample description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Frequency of store %</th>
<th>Sample firms (Publicly available website)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location (County)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monongalia</td>
<td>5 (20%)</td>
<td>Coni and Franc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kanawha</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>David's Bridal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berkeley</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>Jean Ann's Bridal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabell</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>Barbie's Formals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harrison</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>House of Fashion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
<td>The Country Bridal Boutique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upshur</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Dinah's Boutique at Floral Acres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wayne</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Rose Tree Boutique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>J. Jones Evening Wear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenbrier</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Merry Hill &amp; Co.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicholas</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Tennile’s Boutique and Formals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lewis</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Jade Envy Formals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Elizabeth Michaels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putnam</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>Nandels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mineral</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>True Elegance Bridal &amp; Formal Boutique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in Business</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 to 10 years</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
<td>The Vow Boutique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 to 20 years</td>
<td>6 (24%)</td>
<td>Lavish Bridal and Prom Boutique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 to 30 years</td>
<td>3 (12%)</td>
<td>The Queen's Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 30 years</td>
<td>8 (32%)</td>
<td>Suzanne's Fashion and Bridal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Employees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five or less 13 (52%)  Dinah's Boutique at Floral Acres  
> five and < 500 9 (36%)  Yellow Brick Road Prom and Formals  
Unknown 3 (12%)  The Country Bridal Boutique  

Sales Volume  
Less than or equal $500,000 11 (44%)  The Boutique by B.Belle Events LLC  
Greater than $500,000 7 (28%)  David's Bridal  
Unknown 6 (24%)  House of Fashion  

Claimed Resources

The results of the content analysis revealed 25 unique key resources that were claimed by the local bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia (see Table IV). From these key firm resources, it can be observed that having top designer brands (100 percent) was given the highest priority by bridal boutiques in West Virginia described as “Our shop carries many top designer bridal and prom gowns, including attire for the entire wedding party”. The data also revealed that all the bridal boutiques carry a vast category of products (100 percent) and that helped them to keep a good relationship with their customers (100 percent) described as “We have cocktail dresses for your honeymoon, date night out or vacation cruise and also the mother of the bride (or Groom) should not have to worry about what to wear with everything else that has to be done”.

Table 4: Firm resources and frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Firm Resources</th>
<th>Frequency %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Designer Brand</td>
<td>100% (25 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Product Breadth</td>
<td>100% (25 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Good Relation to Customer</td>
<td>100% (25 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Private Appointment</td>
<td>96% (24 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Designer/Consultant</td>
<td>96% (24 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>88% (22 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>88% (22 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Social Media Page</td>
<td>80% (20 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Unique Design</td>
<td>80% (20 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>76% (19 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>76% (19 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Skilled Employees</td>
<td>68% (17 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Competitive Price</td>
<td>64% (16 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Flexible Payment Policy</td>
<td>64% (16 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Alteration Equipment</td>
<td>60% (15 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>44% (11 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>44% (11 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Fashion Trend</td>
<td>40% (10 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Relation to Employees</td>
<td>40% (10 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Home Delivery</td>
<td>32% (08 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Safety/Sanitization Equipment</td>
<td>32% (08 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gift Cards</td>
<td>32% (08 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Interns</td>
<td>28% (07 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>No Return Policy</td>
<td>28% (07 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Awards</td>
<td>24% (06 out of 25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taking private appointments (96 percent) for more personalize dresses were found to be one of the vital resources for these businesses described as “In order for us to properly prepare for your appointment, please use the "message" box to tell us some details about yourself including the date of the event, the type of dress you're looking for, budget, and color choices”. This was followed by having own designer or consultant (96 percent) to provide better design ideas for customers described as “Our consultants will take the time to listen to you, so that together we can create the perfect mix of bridal attire for your occasion”. 
Having an extensive experience (88 percent) in this bridal boutique business were found to be one of the highest mentioned resources which helped them to maintain superior quality (88 percent) for their products described as “The last 36 years have been a whirlwind of excitement, success, and hard work. We still hand select every piece that comes into the store, making sure it is the finest quality for our clients”. The findings also showed that bridal boutiques businesses highlighted their social media pages (80 percent) as their key resource described as “We have our own social media page where customers can view the latest products and services”. This was followed by having unique design dresses (80 percent) described as “We have bridal gowns of unique design to make your day perfect”.

Most bridal boutiques mentioned location (76 percent) as their key resource which described as “We are located in Wheeling, WV and has been serving the Tri-State area for over 70 years”. Business reputation (76 percent) was also highlighted as a major key resource for the bridal boutiques described as “We can create the perfect mix of bridal attire for your occasion and the Vow brides are cared for and treated as part of the family”. This was followed by having skilled employees (68 percent) described as “Our trained staff will skillfully help you select your perfect gown for your perfect occasion” and competitive price (64 percent) described as “We always try to maintain a competitive price for all of our products”. Bridal boutiques business also provides flexible payment policies (64 percent) for their products described as “We offer a 60-day Layaway Program available with thirty percent of the purchase price down as initial payment for in-store purchases”.

Most bridal boutiques also provide alteration services (60 percent) for their customers for better fit described as “Once you have the gown or tuxedo you like, we offer quality alterations. Whether you need a fix a seam or have a seam taken in to fit you better, we can help”. This was followed
by proper infrastructure of the store (44 percent) described as “We are located near downtown historic Lewisburg West Virginia and Yes, there is plenty of parking and it is free!” and social work (44 percent) described as “We strive to work with the community to support the youth & many organizations”.

Many bridal boutiques mentioned that they update themselves with the fashion trend (40 percent) described as “You are sure to see everything from timeless classics to the fresh and trendy styles” and take a good care of their employees (40 percent) described as “In addition to a one-of-a-kind work environment, employees get competitive pay and benefits and a 25% employee discount”.

This was followed by providing home delivery of products (32 percent), having own gift cards (32 percent), and safety and sanitization equipment (32 percent) described as “We continue to follow our cleaning protocol and unless you have your own, we are providing masks upon entry to our store”.

Bridal boutiques seemed to have no return policy (28 percent) for their products described as “Due to the nature of our products, we do not accept any returns, exchanges, or refunds on all items purchased in the boutique. Once you are satisfied with your item and decide to purchase or order, you are responsible for your item”. These boutiques also mentioned that they take interns (28 percent) for their stores. Lasty, the bridal businesses also showcased their awards (24 percent) on the website described as “We are an official gown sponsor for the Miss WV, Miss Indiana and Miss PA USA Pageants, Miss WV award show”.

A total of 395 key resources were coded throughout the study sample, resulting in 15.8 resources described by each bridal boutique.
Classification Based on Theoretical Framework

These 25 key firm resources were then classified into five categories following the conceptual framework of the study (see Table V). First quality, private label, no return policy, home delivery, product breadth, competitive price, social media page, private appointment, design, and fashion trend were categorized into organizational knowledge and learning resources. 177 occurrences were found in this category, resulting in an average of 7.08 resources per business. Second, experience, good relation to customers, reputation, social work, and awards were classified into general organizational resources with a total of 83 occurrences averaging 3.32 resources per business. Third, skilled employees, designers, relation to employees, and interns were classified into human resources with a total of 58 occurrences averaging 2.32 resources per business. Fourth, infrastructure, location, safety/sanitization equipment, and alteration equipment were categorized into physical resources, with a total of 53 occurrences averaging 2.12 resources per business. Finally, gift cards and flexible payment policy were classified into financial resources with a total of 24 occurrences averaging .96 resources per business.

Table 5: Firm resources classification as described by the bridal boutiques in West Virginia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm resource Categories</th>
<th>Firm Resources</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational knowledge and learning resources (177 occurrences)</td>
<td>Private Label</td>
<td>Having own designer products</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Ability to provide high quality products</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No Return Policy</td>
<td>Provide personalized products for individual customers that are not returnable</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home Delivery</td>
<td>Deliver products to customers doorsteps</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competitive Price</td>
<td>Ensure a reasonable and competitive price for the products</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Product Breadth</td>
<td>Provide a wide range of products</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Value</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Page</td>
<td>Connect to customers through social media platforms</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Appointment</td>
<td>Taking care of individual customer</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Design</td>
<td>Creating unique designs and styles for customers</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion trend</td>
<td>Having a good sense of new fashion trend</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Has been in the business for long time</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Relation to Customers</td>
<td>Ability to gain customer satisfaction through the products and service</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td>Receiving appreciation from government or private organization</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>Engagement in social activities</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awards</td>
<td>Receiving reputable awards from fashion shows</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General organizational resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(83 occurrences)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled employees</td>
<td>Having skilled employees for better production</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Relation to Employees</td>
<td>Maintain a good relationship with the employees in the workspace</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Designers</td>
<td>Having own skilled designers for the store</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intern</td>
<td>Providing opportunities for internship</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>Having sufficient area, buildings, power supplies and other facilities</td>
<td>44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Located in a suitable area where customer can go easily</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety/Sanitization Equipment</td>
<td>Providing necessary safety equipment for customers</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alteration Equipment</td>
<td>Providing alteration service for better fit</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift Cards</td>
<td>Having own gift cards for payment</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(58 occurrences)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Skilled employees</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Good Relation to Employees</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Designers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety/Sanitization Equipment</td>
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<td>Alteration Equipment</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gift Cards</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical resources</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(53 occurrences)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<td>Alteration Equipment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gift Cards</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Findings from Qualitative Interview

Organizational Knowledge and Learning Resources to Build Competitive Advantages

The managers and owners described nine unique organizational knowledge and learning resources that were helping the bridal boutique businesses to achieve competitive advantage. They are (a) quality, (b) top designer brand/line, (c) unique design, (d) competitive price, (e) product breadth, (f) private appointment, (g) social media page, (h) visual merchandising, and (i) return policy. Among these nine resources eight were similar to the findings from content analysis. Only visual merchandising was found different in the interviews.

Quality

All of the participants (4 out of 4) described quality as their major resource to gain competitive advantage in the bridal boutique sector and helped them to grow. This was obvious because the bridal dresses tend to be exclusive because of the use of high-quality materials and skilled seamstresses.

Linda: “We were flying by the seat of our pants, but we did a great job picking fine quality products and transformed what was a like a junior kind of young store into a more high-class fashion upper end”

Olivia: “They (customers) can look at the quality of the dresses, and though I mean those dresses are well made and they're beautiful. I have hardly ever had a bride who doesn't love it”
Top Designer Brand/Line

Participants (4 out of 4) also shared that they carry all the top brands to attract their customers and provide them with one of the most exclusive dresses to make their wedding a special occasion. These brands are mostly from the USA and Europe. They also order custom designer dresses from those top brands to fulfill their customer’s need and maintain their business reputation.

Linda: “For the bridal industry, I have Giovanni, it really is one of the biggest one. I also have Sherri Hill and then Tarikh, they are all the highest tier”

Ava: “I have lines that are designed here in the United States, but then we do Pronovias, which is out of Barcelona, Spain and I have Nicole that's out of Italy”

Unique Design

All the participants (4 out of 4) mentioned that most of their dresses have unique design to make any bride feel special and exclusive. These unique design dresses differentiate any specific bridal boutiques from another. Every bridal boutique tries to maintain this uniqueness to be more competitive in the market and attract more local customers as well as customers from outside the state.

Olivia: “So, we represent a lot of different looks that are very exclusive, so the design lines that we carry are not something that you can buy over the internet or any place because I have these designs that no one else carries”

Competitive Price & Product Breadth

Competitive price and product breadth were also emerged as the most important resources as all the participants (4 out of 4) mentioned that these resources helped them to create a customer base
for themselves. This was not surprising because the bridal dresses are expensive, and the customers are always looking for best value products with a lot of options to choose from. Most of the bridal dresses are worn only once, at the wedding party. That’s why customers want to explore a wide variety of dresses and choose something exclusive, unique, and also rightly priced.

Ashley: “We have wedding gowns, bridesmaid dresses, Fargo dresses, mother of the bride, rainbow. We now do men’s and boy’s vests and ties or bow ties and suspenders, prom gowns, homecoming dresses and pageant dresses. Everything that covers the wedding”

Ava: “We have lots and lots of well-made, well designed, and well-priced products. We have things in the store that cost $5 up to $5000 for all type of customers all in the same place”

_Private Appointment_

All the participants (4 out of 4) also shared that they take private appointments to treat their customers individually. Customers can bring their friends and family members during that time to see how they look in any particular dress. Managers and owners were also able to get to know the preference of each customer. As the customers are very sensitive about their bridal dress, the business owners and managers try to provide each customer with proper dress and alteration service which helped them to achieve competitive advantage. Taking private appointments also helped the bridal businesses to serve customers during the pandemic as the government had fixed a certain number of customers at a time in any store.
Olivia: “We do take private appointments. You know, we take each person individually and figure out what's best for them. I'm not trying to put something on them that is not appropriate for them”

Linda: “We had increased the number of private appointments during the pandemic as we were not serving any walk-ins to maintain the government regulations”

**Social Media Page**

Most participants (3 out of 4) described that having a social media page helped them to communicate with their customers. The social media page was mostly used as a marketing tool for the bridal businesses to let the customers know about the recent collection, services, and updates. Customers can also schedule appointments through the social media page. However, participants also share that business website is more helpful for them to communicate with their customers and scheduling appoints. The websites are also used for hiring employees (part-time/full-time) and interns.

Ashley: I think that what the social media does is it helps remind people that we're here and I don't care to have 10,000 followers. I want a couple thousand that actually shop in the store”

Ava: “Our website is great and what I've found is that when I put real life clients with good photography, it's amazing the response that I get. We do put our events up there and it is an excellent tool for scheduling appointments”

Participants also shared that it’s not just website or social media page, the customers also market/advertise their business. The unique services that the customers get from the bridal
boutiques encourage them to suggest their friends and family members to go to that particular store.

Olivia: “Our business grew because of word of mouth. If you treat people right, they're going to send their friends, and that's kind of how it was. You know, it grew more than I expected it to”

*Visual Merchandising*

Visual merchandising was another resource that was mentioned by most of the participants (3 out of 4). Participants shared that their sense of placing things at the right place and establishing a decorative store environment helped them to achieve competitive advantage. Their goal was to create a festive feeling as well as providing family friendly vibe to the customers.

Linda: “When you enter our store, you will definitely get a family feeling as well as wedding. We have separate space where customers can sit with their friends and family to talk about their dresses and stuffs”

*Return Policy*

Most participants (3 out of 4) mentioned that their return policy helped that them to achieve competitive advantage. Most bridal dresses are expensive, and these dresses are customized according to individual customer. So, it is really difficult for the bridal business owners and managers to return their product. That is why most bridal businesses offers a variety of dressing options to any customer so that they would not have to return any product. However, some of the less complex dresses can be returned and store credit are given for those.
Ashley: “I don't give cash refunds. We do exchange within seven days sometimes if one of these amazing brides that has changed her mind. But if anybody buys something and it's a special order, it's theirs”

Ava: “If someone bring the dress back to me before the readiness and really put on some weight or they've lost weight and the dress doesn't fit, they can exchange it for something else, and I'll do that too”

However, it was completely opposite finding from the content analysis as the businesses mentioned no return policy on their website due to the customized nature of the dress. One reason for this could be to acknowledge the customers about the no return policy before coming to the store so that the customers can prepare mentally to buy the right products. If anyone wants to change their products after buying, the managers and owners can waive this policy for less complex dresses as they are the one who makes all the decisions of the business.

Olivia: “As far as my return policies, I'm not a department store, so whenever you think about it, this is my playground and so I can make the rules here”

It was surprising that participants did not describe home delivery and following fashion trend as their resources although it was mentioned in their website. During the Covid-19 pandemic most of the businesses were operating online and that’s why they provided home delivery service for their products. As the pandemic related regulations are now ended, that could be the major reason why bridal boutiques do not provide home delivery currently. Also, the bridal dresses need to be more customized according to individual customer and that’s why customers are coming to store in-person to buy their dresses. This could also be the reason for not mentioning following fashion
trend as a resource. As the bridal dress are more of a personal choice rather than what is going on the fashion industry, following the fashion trend is not necessary in this sector.

**General Organizational Resources to Build Competitive Advantages**

The managers and owners described four general organizational resources that are helping the bridal boutique businesses to achieve competitive advantage. They are (a) customer satisfaction, (b) business experience, (c) reputation, (d) social work. These four resources were similar to the findings from the content analysis.

**Customer Satisfaction**

All of the participants (4 out of 4) described customer satisfaction as their major resource to gain competitive advantage in the bridal business sector and helped them to succeed. As all the bridal boutiques are in-person businesses, the managers and owners deal every customer with love and respect specifically in this post pandemic period. Every customer is important for them whether someone is just roaming around the store or someone who is looking for any specific dress to buy. Not just the customer, the managers and owners of the bridal boutiques value the friends and family member’s comments and suggestions who came with the customer. During the pandemic, there were regulations for dealing with customers and the participants shared that they tried their best to serve their customers in the best possible way.

Linda: “I've been sitting at night for the last two weeks. Beading a gown for someone. She bought a gown. Liked the shape of one gown and selected the beading from another gown. Since the company was not going to do that for her, I've been sitting at home beading it for her”
Ashley: “We value the demands and comments of every customer and their family member. We tried to provide them with the best possible product they are looking for their wedding even in the pandemic time”

**Business Experience**

Participants (4 out of 4) also shared that having an extensive experience in the bridal boutique business sector helped them to achieve customer satisfaction which leads to competitive advantage. The experience in business operation assisted the managers and owners to better understand the demands of the customers and modify their business strategies according to that. During this journey, they have suffered from various problems which eventually helped them to become a successful entrepreneur and overcome the pandemic losses.

Olivia: “I have been running this business for 40 years and with that experience, I can easily understand what a customer is looking for and what will be best for them. My experience surely helps me with the design consultation, business strategy and techniques”

Ava: “We lost everything in the store due to smoke damage and so we had to get rid of everything. But during that period of time, I still paid my staff and we had to clean and paint and buy whatever we could to fill the store again as fast as we could. That set us back a little bit but after that we grew and grew”

**Reputation**

Almost all participants (3 out of 4) mentioned that they have gained a well business reputation due to that extensive business experience and customer satisfaction. This reputation helped the bridal businesses to create a customer base outside the state now customers from Maryland, Virginia,
and Kentucky came to buy bridal dresses from these businesses. This reputation also encouraged many local young entrepreneurs to start their own business.

Linda: “I have all kinds of Queens that come in here and get their dresses for pageants and we don't sponsor them, but we'll donate a dress. I've done that, for the Miss West Virginia team. Also, Queen Strawberry Festival is my cousin. She gets her dresses here so that's bringing some kind of reputation for my business”

Ava: “We're really nice to the girls. I mean we have girls that come in and they're like, hey we'll be back here. I've had girls from Harpers Ferry, Pocahontas, Green Bank. So, they travel like 3-4 hours to come here”

Social Work

Some participants (2 out of 4) also shared social work as one of their resources which helped them to gain competitive advantage. Managers and owners of the bridal stores involved themselves in many social activities such as organizing charity funds, fashion show, health camping etc. Participants described that these social activities were contributing towards community development.

Olivia: “We've been doing all kinds of different social things to meet the needs of the community, let's say that when the community didn't need anymore, we closed it and do something else”

It was surprising that the participants did not share anything about awards which was mentioned in their website as a resource. However, as the managers and owners were actively involved in the social work, this could lead to achieving awards for their business from various organizations.
Human Resources to Build Competitive Advantages

The managers and owners described four human resources that are helping the bridal boutique businesses to achieve competitive advantage. They are (a) skilled staff, (b) employee satisfaction, (c) private design consultant, (d) internship opportunity. These four resources were similar to the findings from the content analysis.

Skilled Staff

All the participants (4 out of 4) described that they have highly skilled staffs who are helping them to operate their business smoothly and steadily. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the managers and owners had to lay off some of their employees as there was no business for a long time. The managers and owners are now getting back their employees as wedding have resumed and train their employees by themselves to make them efficient and active. The managers and owners were also look for design educational background peoples for their store so that they can understand the basics of the bridal dresses and can guide the customers. The benefit of skilled employees is that they can handle customer by their own and can operate the business without the presence of their manager or owner.

Linda: “We have at least about minimum three of the part timer and then during the peak season and all the peak time at least six or seven highly skilled employees to operate the business”

Ava: “I was able to design and whenever the store got too busy, I hired people and anybody who ever worked with me had the design training”
Employee Satisfaction

All participants (4 out of 4) also shared that they have a very good relationship with their employees, and they always take good care of them. During the pandemic, they had to lay off their employees but as soon as they get back into the business, they called back all of their employees. They even provided the employees with necessary loans and financial support to settle back into the life after this pandemic. The employees were also satisfied with the care they received from these businesses and were really flexible with the business hour. They were working late hours if they had to without any complain. The managers and owners also provide employee discounts to all the products.

Ashley: “We always have employee discount because that is just so important and we always encourage also like the bonuses, more like a Commission. That's also like an extra encouragement for the employees”

Linda: “During the pandemic time, (the employees are) being so supportive, and they keep asking if anything that they can help, so they're being just very sentimental and then also very caring”

Private Design Consultant

Participants (2 out of 4) also described that they had private design consultant to assist the customers with the right dress. These design consultants were highly skilled and able to satisfy the needs of the customers. The managers and owners shared that having this private consultant helped them to gain a competitive edge in the bridal business sector.
Olivia: “My consultants are the shadow of myself or one of my experiences. So that they can develop their own sales technique. They understand the Mantra to make someone feel beautiful so that they buy our dresses”

*Internship Opportunity*

Most participants (2 out of 4) described interns as one of their vital resources which helped them to achieve competitive advantage. The managers and owners shared that they hire student interns from fashion design background as well as business background to assist their business. Due to pandemic, they stopped the internship program for a certain time, but they resumed internship now. They also mentioned that this opportunity assists the students in their future career and also this promotes community development.

Ashley: “I always took interns from West Virginia University. Whether it was in the business department or in the design department, I always encourage students for internship and so that they learn more about the business and customers”

The actual resources found from the interview were similar to the claimed resources found from the content analysis. There were no discrepancies between the claimed human resources and actual human resources.

*Physical Resources to Build Competitive Advantages*

The managers and owners described four human resources that are helping the bridal boutique businesses to achieve competitive advantage. They are (a) attractive location, (b) safety and sanitization equipment for covid-19, (c) alteration equipment, and (d) strong store infrastructure. These four resources were similar to the findings from the content analysis.
**Attractive Location**

All of the participants (4 out of 4) shared that they have a suitable location for their business which attracts the customers very easily. They also mentioned that they have chosen their business location very carefully so that customers can easily find it. Not just it, this perfect location was helping them to serve customers from all the counties as well as customers from the neighboring states. They either have taken a lease or bought the place to secure the location for a long term to achieve a competitive advantage over other bridal businesses.

Linda: “This is the best spot on the street, and I have good front window space. When people are going to park, they normally hit that parking lot across the street, so we're the first thing that they see”

Ava: “It is one of the prime locations and you can feel it and also since it's such a new facility it is a big attraction for people around. So, I believe the foot traffic is definitely a higher possibility”

**Safety and Sanitization Equipment for Covid-19**

Participants (4 out of 4) also described that they have taken adequate steps to reduce the spread of the virus. They have followed the state and federal government’s instruction from the very beginning of the pandemic. They had mandatory mask requirement until the state government waived this regulation. They provided face mask and hand sanitizer to all their customers. Although there is currently no regulation for store sanitization, they have all the necessary equipment to sanitize the dresses and the floors.

Ashley: “We still do the regular sanitation like monthly. We hired a company for monthly sanitization. We do clean up the dresses also after each appointment”
Linda: “We sanitize every corner of our store so that our customers feel safe inside our store. Although there are no mask regulations now, we still give masks to the customers who want it”

Alteration Equipment

Most participants (3 out of 4) mentioned alteration equipment as one of the major resources for their business. As the bridal dress are very personalized in nature, the managers and owners were giving priority for the alteration services. They have their own alteration machine with skilled seamstresses to help the customers with accurate fitting of their dresses. Having own alteration equipment assist the customer with on spot customization and provide the bridal businesses a competitive advantage.

Ashley: “We provide excellent alterations services to customers so that they can have their perfect dress with a perfect fitting”

Ava: “Covid-19 has changed people's bodies. Let's just say that they stayed at home. They didn't work out and gained weight. Then they started working out and now they come in and they buy something, and they've lost weight. So, we have a lot of size changes and our alteration services, and our in-house alteration equipment and seamstress helped us to provide necessary support”

Strong Store Infrastructure

Some participants (2 out of 4) also described that they have a strong infrastructure for their store which helped them to accommodate a specific number of customers without any hassle. This well infrastructure assisted the managers and owners to maintain the government regulations and manage customers during the pandemic.
Olivia: “We have adequate space inside our store to accommodate a large number customer at a time which helped us during the pandemic to maintain social distancing and doing business”

The claimed physical resources found in the content analysis were similar to the actual resources found from the interview. There were no discrepancies between the claimed and actual physical resources.

*Financial Resources to Build Competitive Advantages*

The managers and owners described two financial resources that are helping the bridal boutique businesses to achieve a competitive advantage. They are (a) flexible payment policy, and (b) on hold payment for rental. This flexible payment policy was similar to the findings from the content analysis.

*Flexible Payment Policy*

All the participants (4 out of 4) described that they have a flexible payment policy to assist their customers with their purchase. They also shared that they have all types of payment method so that customers can have multiple options to pay for their merchandise. The managers and owners mentioned that they provide a layaway for the customers to pay for their dresses in installment. As the bridal dresses tend to be very expensive, paying in installment would encourage the customers to buy the perfect dress for their special day.

Linda: “I take all things. I take all credit cards, cash drop, and apple pay. I also take PayPal. I take it all. There are so many different clients. I mean someone wants to write a check; they can write a check. I'm not going to just say only take cash. Because we have to be flexible”
Ava: “We have layaway's so people can pay in installment. They can layaway and put 20% down. To place a special order, they have to put half down and then they have to pay for it whenever it comes in”

*On Hold Payment*

Some participants (2 out of 4) also shared that they provide on hold payment for the rental dresses. The customer has to provide all the payment information to the manager or owner and can have the dress on rent. If the customer returns the rented dress within the certain time than a certain amount of fee is deducted from the given payment method. If the customer didn’t return the dress than the full price of the dress is deducted.

Ashley: “She (customer) can rent their wedding dress today, pay the one rental price and keep it into her wedding. She has to leave me the credit card information or a check for the deposit. We keep that information and paperwork. When they bring the dress back, we give that back and if they never bring it back then we'll cash the check or run the card they own”

From the claimed financial resources, only flexible payment policy was found similar to the actual resources interpreted from the interview. However, the participants did not mention about the gift cards which was found from the content analysis. Also, on hold payment was revealed as another actual resource described by the managers and owners. So, there were discrepancies between the claimed and actual financial resources.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter presents the conclusion of this study. This chapter contains the following sections (a) a summary of the study, (b) contributions, (c) implications, (d) limitations, and (e) future scope for research.

Summary of the Study

The aim of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the firm resources of the SMBs in West Virginia during this post-pandemic period. The study was conducted on the context of the local bridal boutique businesses operating in West Virginia. The findings of the study identified the claimed and actual firm resources possessed by the bridal boutique businesses and how these resources are helping the businesses to achieve a competitive advantage in the market. The study’s data was viewed through the resource-based theory of the firm and the identified key resources were also categorized according to the five firm resource categories established in the theory: organizational knowledge and learning resource, general organizational resource, human resource, physical resource, and financial resource. Two types of key resources were found in this study, one is claimed resources and the other is actual resources. The claimed resources were found using the content analysis of the websites of those bridal boutique businesses. The actual resources were found from the qualitative interviews conducted with the managers and owners of the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. The study findings also highlighted the discrepancies between the claimed and actual resources.

There were marked similarities – as well as differences – between the claimed and actual firm resources possessed by the bridal boutique businesses. In the organizational knowledge and learning resources category, 10 key resources were identified as claimed resources. They were
quality, private label, no return policy, home delivery, product breadth, competitive price, social media page, private appointment, design, and fashion trend. Among these 10 key resources, 8 were found similar to the actual resources. Providing home delivery of products and following fashion trend were the only two claimed resources that were different. Additionally, visual merchandising was found as a key resource in the actual resources which was different from the claimed ones. In the general organizational knowledge category, 5 key resources were identified as claimed resources. They were experience, good relations with customers, reputation, social work, and awards. Among these 5 key resources, 4 were found similar to the actual resources. Achieving awards was the only claimed resource that was not found in actual resources.

In the human resource category, 4 key resources were identified as claimed. They are skilled employees, designers, relation to employees, and interns. The actual resource findings for the human resources category were similar to the claimed ones. In the physical resource category, 4 key resources were identified as claimed. They were infrastructure, location, safety/sanitization equipment, and alteration equipment. The actual resources in this category were similar to the claimed resources. In the financial resource category, 2 key resources were identified as claimed. They were flexible payment policy and gift cards. The actual resources in this category were flexible payment policy and on hold payments.

The findings from both the claimed and actual resources revealed that product quality, skilled employees, and extensive business experience were the most important key resources for the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia. These three resources directly or indirectly helped to build other key resources for the business such as selecting merchandise from top designer brand, having vast category and unique design products, building business reputation, creating social media
presence, having a suitable business location, establishing a strong store infrastructure, and providing various customer services.

The findings also revealed that taking private appointment and having own designer/consultant were another two major resources which were helping the bridal boutiques to achieve competitive advantage. These two resources were positively affecting the customer satisfaction as the customers were treated individually and getting expert advice from the consultant. Although the covid-19 pandemic affected the overall business operation and the relationship with customers, employees as well as vendors, the managers and owners are now having a good time as the wedding are now resumed.

**Contributions**

This study has several contributions to the literature. First, the study finding support and expand the resource-based theory. The five firm resources mentioned in the resource-based theory helped to identify the key resources of the bridal boutique businesses in this post-pandemic period. Additionally, the theory assisted in analyzing how the identified key resources are helping these businesses to achieve and sustain competitive advantage. In this study, we see quality, experience, and skilled employees as the major firm resources which creates value to the bridal boutique businesses.

Second, the significance of this study lies in that it provides new evidence on how SMBs have been competing in the post-pandemic situation. Several studies found the impact of this pandemic on SMBs across the United States, but no study has investigated the firm resources possessed by these businesses during this post-pandemic period. More specifically in rural regions like West
Virginia, where SMBs play a vital role towards the state’s economy. Therefore, this study added value to the literature.

Third, by identifying the key firm resources of the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia, the study findings might help the future entrepreneurs who are interested in investing in the bridal businesses. The findings would help to prepare themselves with the key resources they must establish and sustain when they invest or start a new business.

Fourth, this study will contribute to the curriculum development of business-related or merchandising-related academic courses. The study findings might add value to the existing curriculum by developing knowledge and obtaining skill sets to help the SMBs to achieve more key firm resources. This will also assist in strengthening education for the future generation. For example, merchandise selection, human and physical resource management skills may be included in the general curriculum to prepare the future entrepreneurs.

**Implications**

The study results supported the purpose of the study and answered the research questions. SMBs should look at their existing internal resources and strategically plan their competitive resources to survive through crisis conditions, through adapting management practices in any environment. This study therefore has implications for the policy makers, business owners, future entrepreneurs, and academia. First, the findings of this study inform the federal and state decision-makers about the present situation of the bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia and provide the decision-makers with the necessary information about the expectations these business owners have from the federal and state government. Thus, helping the decision-makers to make productive and worthwhile decisions to support the SMBs in West Virginia.
Second, the study findings on the key resources of the bridal boutique businesses in the post-pandemic period may help individual bridal boutique business owners and managers in West Virginia to identify the necessary steps that other business owners had taken to build these major resources. This may help them to improvise their business strategy and make new business policies to carve out a customer base for their business. So, this may assist them to regain their competitive advantages in this post-pandemic situation.

Third, the findings of this study could be used as a guide for future entrepreneurs who want to establish their own bridal boutique business as the study provided a complete analysis of the claimed and actual firm resources of the bridal boutique businesses. By following the study results, future entrepreneurs can establish a successful business for themselves. For example, future entrepreneurs might not have business experience, but they should be more willing to invest in product quality, product breadth, hiring skilled employees, and suitable locations to achieve a competitive advantage.

Fourth, the study findings could greatly help academic departments in merchandising, business administration, supply chain management, organizational management, and entrepreneurship discipline. Academic departments may find the findings of this study useful for guidance and education purposes. More specifically, the apparel merchandising and entrepreneurship discipline may incorporate the study’s findings into coursework or career development programs to shed light on the unique value addition strategies implemented by the bridal boutique business owners.

Finally, the study can also be used as a framework to conduct business resource research on small and micro businesses as well as medium and large businesses. This research framework can be used in any region to identify any specific business or industry’s key resources and how these resources are helping to gain a competitive advantage over their competitors.
Limitations

This study had certain limitations. First, this study analyzed the bridal boutique businesses only in West Virginia. There are several other regions close to West Virginia such as some parts of Maryland (Cumberland, Oakland, Frostburg, Grantsville), Virginia (Roanoke, Harrisonburg), and Pennsylvania (Washington, Uniontown, Canonsburg, Pittsburgh) could be included in this study to get a better understanding on the firm resources possessed by these businesses.

Second, this study focused on the bridal businesses, a part of small and micro businesses. Therefore, the whole picture of the small and micro business resources during the post-pandemic period couldn’t be drawn together.

Third, only four qualitative interviews were conducted with the bridal boutique business owners and managers for this study. As this is (summer) a very busy season for any bridal business, it was obvious that most business owners or manager would not get enough time for the interview. However, a higher number of interviews would provide a clearer picture of the firm resources.

Finally, the study was qualitative, generalizations of the results cannot be done.

Future Scope for Research

This study provided some scope for future research. Future research should look into the bridal businesses in the nearby regions of West Virginia for better results. Future research should also try to compare the key resources among the bridal boutique businesses situated in those different regions. Additionally, future research is recommended with large samples, quantitative surveys, and sales data to verify the actual key resources and competitive advantages of the bridal boutique businesses and to make the study more generalizable.
References


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Appendix A: IRB Approval

West Virginia University
OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTIONS
886 Chestnut Ridge Road  Morgantown, WV  26506

Flex Model Approval

04/26/2022

To: Debanjan Das
From: WVU Office of Human Research Protections

Protocol Type: NHSR / Flex  Approval Date: 04/26/2022
Submission Type: Initial  Expiration Date: 04/25/2027
Funding: N/A

WVU Protocol #: 2204555136
Protocol Title: Analysis of the firm resources of the Bridal Businesses in West Virginia

The West Virginia University Institutional Review Board has determined that your submission of protocol 2204555136 qualifies for approval under the WVU Flexibility Review Model.

• FLEX: The review of the above referenced protocol was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report. The protocol meets the criteria for approval Flex Model Review because the project does not have federal funding, is considered to be minimal risk, and falls within the guidelines of the WVU Flex Model as of this approval date.

The following documents were reviewed and approved for use as part of this submission. Only the documents listed below may be used in the research. Please access and print the files in the Notes & Attachments section of your approved protocol.

• Ishtehar Interview Instrument Final.docx
• Informed Consent.pdf
• Data Protection Certificate - Debanjan Das.pdf
• Form-25 IC OMR Cover Letter Template .pdf

WVU IRB approval of protocol 2204555136 will expire on 04/25/2027.
1. There is no continuing review option for Flex protocols. If this protocol is still active after five (5) years and you intend to continue, you will need to resubmit a new protocol for approval no less than three (3) weeks prior to the expiration date in order to ensure uninterrupted study continuation.

2. Amendments are not accepted on Flex protocols and are not required as long as there is no increase to risk to participants and changes do not exclude the study from Flex inclusion criteria.

3. The IRB must be notified if there is an increase in risk to participants or if federal funding is awarded to conduct research under this protocol. In any of these cases, this protocol must be submitted as a new submission in WVU+kc.

4. Unanticipated, serious adverse events and/or side effect(s) encountered at WVU or an affiliate site that are related to the research must be reported to the WVU IRB within five (5) days using the Notify IRB action in WVU+kc.

5. Any Unanticipated Problem or UPIRTSO or other research related event resulting in new or increased risk of harm to study subjects, occurring at WVU or an affiliate site, must be reported to the WVU IRB within five (5) days using the Notify IRB action in WVU+kc.

6. All research personnel performing tasks related to the research must complete and remain current for the required training as applicable to the protocol referenced above.

7. **Only Flex Consent Forms with the WVU+kc watermark may be used to consent participants.**

The WVU Office of Human Research Protections will be glad to provide assistance to you throughout the research process. Please feel free to contact us by phone at 304.293.7073 or by email at IRB@mail.wvu.edu.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

**Joseph Malcolm**  
Program Coordinator
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Prospective Participant,

This letter is a request for you to participate in a research project about the bridal businesses in West Virginia. This project is being conducted by Ishtehar Sharif Swazan in the Fashion, Dress and Merchandising department at WVU to fulfill requirements for a master’s degree in Research under the supervision of Dr. Debanjan Das, Assistant Professor in the Fashion, Dress and Merchandising department.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to answer some of the questions related to your business. Your participation in this project will take approximately 20 minutes. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

Your participation in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible. All data will be reported in the aggregate. You will not be asked any questions that could lead back to your identity as a participant. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer, and you may stop participating at any time. The West Virginia University Institutional Review Board's acknowledgment or approval of this project is on file with the WVU Office of Human Research Protections.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to contact me at 681-285-9407 or by email at is3352@mix.wvu.edu. Additionally, you can contact the WVU Office of Human Research Protections at 304-293-7073.

I hope that you will participate in this research project, as it could help us better understand how the bridal businesses are operating in West Virginia. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Debanjan Das, PhD
Assistant Professor
Fashion, Dress and Merchandising department.
Appendix C: Interview Instrument

Interview Instrument

**Basic Company Information**

1. How and when was your company founded? Please give a brief history of your company.

2. How did you choose this location for your business and how it beneficial to your business? Why?

3. What type of employees do you have (part-time, full-time, seasonal, interns etc.) and how do you recruit and utilize them?

4. What categories of bridal products do you have? How do you select your merchandize?

**Key resources**

5. How is your business going? [Probe about financial standing of the business]

6. What is unique about your business (like private designer, skilled seamstresses, quality products, various types of products) that your competitor would find it hard to imitate? [Probe for details]

7. How do you obtain or maintain this uniqueness that you mentioned?

8. According to you, what makes your business successful? (Your own skill, skilled employees, your suppliers, customer service etc.) [Probe for details]
   a) How do you keep your customers happy?
   b) What brands do you carry? Do you have any private labels? Are there any design lines that you carry? If so, does it help you to grow your business?
   c) What is your return policy and payment methods?
   d) What services do you offer to your customers? Are there any services that makes you unique?
9. Is your website helping you become a successful entrepreneur? Why/why not? How do you use your website?

10. Are there any social media pages like Facebook, Instagram for your business? If yes, then, how do you use them?

**Covid-19**

11. Has covid-19 affected your business? If yes, how?
   a) How has Covid-19 changed your relationship with consumers?
   b) How has Covid-19 affected the relationship with your employees?
   c) How has Covid-19 affected relationships with your suppliers and other local businesses?

12. How is your present business environment (consumer safety, sanitization, business hour, employee satisfaction)?

13. Do you think that the Small Business Administration, and the government policies (like PPP loan, Stimulus check) were supportive during this pandemic period? If so, how it affected your business?

**General**

14. In your opinion, how the bridal business has changed because of the Covid-19 pandemic?
   a) What are the most significant impacts of the pandemic on the bridal businesses (yours and others)?

15. Are there any other thoughts or opinions you would like to share?
WVU Research Data Protection Certificate
Low-Risk Data

Certificate# 3020

Keep this document with your project records. Attach this document to the protocol submission and provide it for Data Use Agreements. The protection requirements for the data associated with your project are provided below. The implementation and adherence to the requirements are the responsibility of the Principal Investigator. If the data requirements change for the project, a new Data Protection Request form must be completed by the PI.

General Information

Research Project Title: Analysis of the firm resources of the Bridal Businesses in West Virginia
Principal Investigator: Debanjan Das
Department: Design and Community Development
Date of Certification: 04/06/2022
WVU HIPAA Covered Entity: No
Medical Record Access: No
International Components: No
Data Sharing and Transfer (in/out of WVU Institutional Entities): No
All software is on the WVU Approved Technology for Research List: Yes
New technology products or services needed for this project: No

Data Overview

Data Source: Data Collection (Anonymous)
Data Type: No Sensitive or Identifiable Data

Data Variables Selected:
None

Approved Data Plan:

Your project has been classified as low risk because you are not collecting identifiable data. You may collect and/or store project data using the following technology solutions:

- Storage is permitted on:
  - University network drive (HSC or WVU)
  - Storage on Personal network drive (e.g., J:, N:, Y:)
  - University OneDrive or SharePoint
  - MIX Google Drive
  - University-owned device
  - WVU Research Data Depot (minimal charge for use)
  - Personal device (Students only)
- Use of University Devices is required for employees. Students may use personal devices provided the device meets the requirements of the Bring Your Own Device Standard.
- WVU Qualtrics, RedCAP, or HSC Qualtrics may be used for collection of information and/or electronic Informed Consent.
Next Steps

- Submit your protocol to the IRB and attach this Data Protection Certificate.
- If you indicated that the project requires unapproved software, you will be contacted via automated email for payment software, or within 1-3 business days by support staff for data collection or participant communication software.

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