

Swazan, Ishtehar Sharif; Das, Debanjan; Sherfinski, Melissa

Article

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*Corresponding author: Ishtehar Sharif Swazan, Textile and Apparel Management, University of Missouri, 323 Gwynn Hall, Columbia, MO 65201, USA
E-mail: isf5d@missouri.edu

Reviewing editor:
Pablo Ruiz, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

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MANAGEMENT | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Surviving or thriving? Unraveling the business resources enabling competitive advantage in locally owned bridal boutiques

Ishtehar Sharif Swazan^{1*}, Debanjan Das² and Melissa Sherfinski³

Abstract: Bridal boutiques quickly became the most popular bridal business as bridal dress is considered the biggest priority for any bride. To capture this market, many locally-owned bridal boutiques were established within U.S. local communities, subsequently becoming integral to the economic fabric by fostering entrepreneurship and generating employment opportunities. Our study aims to explore the resources possessed by these businesses in this post-pandemic period and how these resources are assisting in achieving competitive advantage. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out for this study, and Resource-Based Theory (RBT) was used as the conceptual framework. The study findings unveiled that the knowledge and experience of business owners emerged as a vital resource, enabling boutique owners to effectively steer their businesses right from their inception. The study findings contributed to the existing body of small fashion/apparel business literature by presenting novel evidence regarding the competitive advantage of local bridal boutiques.

Subjects: Fashion & Beauty Industries; Manufacturing Industries; Business, Management and Accounting; Fashion

Keywords: bridal boutique; U.S. local business; fashion retail; resource-based theory; retail management; competitive advantage

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ishtehar Sharif Swazan is a doctoral student in the Textile and Apparel Management Department at the University of Missouri. He completed his Master's in Design and Merchandising from West Virginia University and Bachelor's in Apparel Manufacturing Technology from Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh. His research interest focuses on organizational psychology and consumer behavior.

Debanjan Das is an assistant professor in the Fashion, Dress and Merchandising Department at West Virginia University. He earned his Doctorate and Master's from the University of Missouri. His research program explores the apparel industry from the social, economic and humane viewpoint. His research program investigates the human factor of the industry, social sustainability, small fashion business competitiveness and fashion industry labor issues.

Melissa Sherfinski is an associate professor in the Elementary & Early Childhood Education Department at West Virginia University. She earned her Doctorate and Master's from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research interests include pedagogy and education, social justice, and qualitative methodologies.



1. Introduction

Weddings represent a significant industry in the United States (US), reaching an estimated value of 26 billion USD in 2020 (Jones et al., 2022). According to a survey conducted by The Knot, a popular online wedding planning site, the average nationwide cost of a wedding in 2022 was \$30,000, indicating a notable increase of \$2,000 from the previous year (Forrest, 2023). This survey also revealed that the average expenditure on a wedding dress in 2022 stood at \$1,900, a substantial contrast to the cost of regular attire (Hanlon, 2023). Remarkably, around 98% of female respondents in the survey opted to wear a new dress for their wedding, highlighting the enduring popularity of this tradition (Hanlon, 2023). This statistic emphasizes the importance of selecting the finest wedding dress, as every bride aspires to achieve a unique and elegant appearance on her special day (Jones et al., 2022; Park & Suh, 2006). The substantial scale of the wedding market, as highlighted by this trend, underscores consumers' willingness to allocate significant financial resources to their wedding celebrations (Howard, 2010).

In response to the burgeoning demand for bridal dresses, numerous local bridal boutique businesses have emerged, catering to the needs of brides, their entourages, and local communities (Clarke et al., 2012). These boutiques, which are a common presence across diverse US communities, offer a wide array of dress options and are typically independently owned and operated, often consisting of a single physical store (Jones et al., 2022). Local entrepreneurs, who are primarily women, embark on establishing their own bridal boutiques, driven by their profound passion for weddings (Howard, 2008; Miller et al., 2022). Moreover, these boutiques also contribute significantly to community development by fostering entrepreneurship, creating employment opportunities, and engaging in philanthropic activities by supporting local charities (Urbano et al., 2019). The money spent at these local bridal boutiques circulates within the community, benefiting individuals through employee salaries and rent payments (Alekseev et al., 2023). Hence, nurturing the growth and longevity of these enterprises stands as a cornerstone for bolstering local economies and fostering community well-being.

However, local bridal boutiques face vulnerability in the face of unpredictability and also contend with substantial competition from nationwide retail chain bridal fashion stores, such as David's Bridal and The Dress Tribe. Furthermore, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges for all bridal businesses, with the absence of physical/traditional weddings during the initial year of the virus outbreak (Fairlie, 2020). The aftermath of the pandemic has also led to inflationary pressures and supply chain disruptions, influencing the overall expenditures associated with weddings (Forrest, 2023). Nevertheless, local bridal boutiques have exhibited resilience and determination to endure and distinguish themselves as the wedding industry is booming again after a pandemic-imposed drought (Pywell & Probert, 2022).

In response to the pandemic and changing market dynamics, local bridal boutiques are striving to establish a strong reputation within their local communities, aiming to gain a competitive edge by cultivating a loyal customer base (Bornman & Steenkamp, 2023). Moreover, they have constantly been upgrading their available resources and developing new resources to become more competitive (Jones et al., 2022; Pywell & Probert, 2022). According to Resource-Based Theory (RBT), both available internal resources and newly developed resources that are tailored to the industry, market, or competitive context play a crucial role in achieving a competitive advantage for any business (Barney, 1991). Thus, leveraging both existing resources and newly developed assets is anticipated to aid local bridal boutiques in setting themselves apart from competing retail bridal fashion chains and attaining a competitive advantage. It becomes imperative, therefore, to delve into the array of business resources at the disposal of the locally owned bridal boutique, as this knowledge empowers effective management, cultivates a competitive edge, secures financial stability, and enables nimble responses to the ever-evolving market landscape.

Despite their growing significance in American localities, there is a notable research gap, as no prior studies have investigated the existing and newly developed resources possessed by local

bridal boutiques. Previous research endeavors have delved into the post-pandemic bridal industry, seeking insights into the diverse trends, customs, and facets within bridal sectors across various countries (Jones et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022; Pywell & Probert, 2022; Reed & Brunson, 2021). Nevertheless, a common limitation within these studies is the tendency to portray all businesses within the global bridal industry, including those in the US and worldwide, as uniform entities. This portrayal tends to overlook a critical distinction: bridal boutiques, in particular, stand out significantly from other players in the bridal sector. Their uniqueness stems from their provision of a highly specialized, customer-centric approach when it comes to bridal attire, marked by a strong emphasis on the emotional and personal aspects intrinsic to the experience of shopping for wedding dresses (Pywell & Probert, 2022; Reed & Brunson, 2021). This distinct focus sets them apart distinctly from other categories of bridal-related businesses. Therefore, the objective of our study is to develop a thorough comprehension of the resources owned by local bridal boutiques and how the possession of these resources contributes to their attainment of a competitive advantage in the post-pandemic era. To address the shortage of research, the current study has the following research question:

RQ: Amidst the evolving post-pandemic era, what valuable resources do local bridal boutiques possess, and how do these resources act as catalysts in their pursuit of gaining a competitive edge?

To address this research question, we employed a qualitative research design involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with the owners and managers of local bridal boutiques. We incorporated the Resource-Based Theory (RBT) framework to understand how these resources assist local bridal boutiques in gaining a competitive edge, a segment that has received limited attention in previous research. By exploring the business resources of these boutiques, the study expands the knowledge base in the field of small fashion and apparel businesses, offering practical insights for entrepreneurs and policymakers supporting local economies.

2. Literature review

2.1. Bridal businesses in the US

The US bridal industry was not always as big as it is today. From the colonial period through the 19th century, people considered weddings as celebrations for new households/marriages that were confined to friends and family (Howard, 2008; Leonard, 2019). There used to be a small celebration with some homemade food, and the bride tended to wear a new dress made by her mother or other female family members. The dress generally was not white because it was not a one-time dress at that time, and brides typically wore it after the wedding (Park & Suh, 2006; Sykes & Jan, 2015). Although celebrations varied across the country based on custom, religion, and culture, a brand-new bridal dress was common at every wedding. However, the wedding industry started to change after the World War II era when big weddings became a part of the “American Dream” and a variety of businesses began to provide goods and services for the celebration of middle-class and elite weddings (Howard, 2008). During the early 20th century, several magazines and Hollywood movies started to portray marriage as a grand occasion, which had a large influence on consumers (Howard, 2008). Consequently, a wide range of businesses and occupations, including bridal boutiques, bridal event designers, bridal consultants, bridal photography, bridal salons, jewelry retailers, bridal caterers, and etiquette writers began to emerge on the scene (Leonard, 2019).

2.1.1. Local bridal boutiques

Although a variety of businesses were profiting from this big wedding culture, bridal boutiques gradually emerged as the major players in this market due to the increased demand for bridal dresses (Howard, 2008). The widely held view in Western culture was that the wedding day is the bride’s day to shine, and the bridal gown became the most important symbol of a bride’s unique personality and style (Leonard, 2019; Sykes & Jan, 2015). The large market share of this bridal dress business in the US encouraged many local entrepreneurs to establish their own bridal boutiques within their community,

catering to the needs of local customers (Howard, 2008). These local bridal boutiques in the US can be identified as small-scale enterprises characterized by constrained financial capital and human resources, typically employing fewer than 500 individuals (Anastasia, 2015; Pozo et al., 2019; Storey, 2016). In the majority of cases, these boutiques are established and managed by the owners themselves, frequently as startup ventures (Howard, 2008).

Despite being a part of small businesses, particularly small fashion businesses, local bridal boutiques differ from other fashion businesses in several aspects. First, the main clientele of bridal boutiques consists of individuals who are actively planning for their weddings, resulting in a relatively niche customer base, while other fashion businesses have a broader and more diverse target audience (Jones et al., 2022). Second, local bridal boutiques focus specifically on bridal wear and require specialized knowledge and expertise in the latest wedding trends and styles. They also have to offer personalized consultations and assistance to brides, ensuring a tailored experience (Howard, 2010). In contrast, other fashion businesses need to provide a broader selection of clothing for different occasions and generally do not require specialized knowledge and personalized consultations (Clarke et al., 2012). Lastly, local bridal boutiques are required to create a supportive and celebratory atmosphere for brides, given the emotional significance associated with weddings, while other fashion businesses may not necessarily have the same level of emotional significance associated with their products (Clarke et al., 2012; Sykes & Jan, 2015).

Local bridal boutiques, despite their unique characteristics compared to other fashion businesses, encounter intense competition from national or regional chain bridal boutiques (e.g., David's Bridal and The Dress Tribe) that cater to a similar customer base (Jones et al., 2022). For instance, in their study, Clarke et al. (2012) investigated the sensory encounter of customers visiting a small fashion boutique and found that the presence of established brand recognition and a larger customer base in retail chain bridal boutiques creates difficulties for local boutiques in terms of gaining visibility and attracting customers. Furthermore, retail chain bridal boutiques typically have online platforms, including e-commerce and social media, while local boutiques often lack an online presence, which poses a disadvantage in terms of digital accessibility (Jones et al., 2022). However, Miller et al. (2011), in their study on the networking capability of apparel store owners in small communities in the US, found that locally-owned businesses operating within local communities in the US enjoy several attributes/advantages such as local ties and personal bonding that make them different from national or global chains. Moreover, the establishment of personal relationships with customers has assisted local bridal boutique owners in building trust and brand value for their stores, which triggers word-of-mouth marketing, giving them an additional competitive edge (Miller et al., 2011; Vo Minh et al., 2022). In spite of having these advantages, local bridal boutiques often lack risk management strategies (i.e., contingency planning, employee training and awareness, business monitoring and review) which makes them vulnerable to any disruption (Miller et al., 2022).

2.2. Impact of COVID-19 on bridal boutiques

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive economic damage to bridal boutique businesses in the US (Fairlie, 2020; Jones et al., 2022). Bridal boutiques experienced a more pronounced negative impact from the pandemic compared to other fashion businesses, primarily due to the prohibition of traditional weddings (Pywell & Probert, 2022). Due to the implementation of lockdowns and social distancing measures, bridal boutiques were compelled to temporarily cease operations and shutter their physical stores (Pywell & Probert, 2022). The temporary shutdown lasted for about six months, which resulted in many bridal boutiques, especially local ones, closing permanently due to their inability to pay employee salaries, rent, and utilities (Alekseev et al., 2023; Belitski et al., 2022). Although the government ordered the reopening of businesses after almost six months, many people were still scared to host physical weddings (Probert & Pywell, 2021). In their study, Pywell and Probert (2022) conducted a survey targeting couples who had intended to get married from March to December 2020. This study specifically examines the extent to which respondents opted to postpone their weddings. The findings revealed a significant number of couples who had

to delay their wedding plans by approximately 8–12 months due to concerns surrounding the pandemic. Furthermore, bridal boutiques encountered challenges in procuring inventory, resulting in possible scarcities and delays in order fulfillment (Bornman & Steenkamp, 2023).

Reed and Brunson (2021) undertook a case study examining the influence of the pandemic on Kleinfeld Bridal, a local bridal boutique situated in New York City renowned for its popular bridal gown television show, “Say Yes to the Dress.” The study revealed that bridal dresses typically involve complex designs and the use of specialized materials, and the COVID-19 pandemic has presented obstacles in sourcing these materials and accessories. Consequently, the prices of certain materials and accessories have been impacted, resulting in higher costs for bridal dresses compared to pre-pandemic times. Moreover, it was hard for local bridal boutiques to sell merchandise online during the pandemic as these businesses rely on in-person shopping experiences and have a less developed online presence (Pywell & Probert, 2022). However, with change comes innovation, and the bridal boutiques developed new ways to stabilize their business and enhance service quality by applying for federal and state government loans, hiring experienced designers or consultants, and providing a safe shopping experience (Bornman & Steenkamp, 2023; Reed & Brunson, 2021).

2.3. Research gap and objective

Although it is recognized that these innovative measures have the capacity to emerge as a substantial resource and when integrated with preexisting resources, may have a beneficial influence on local bridal boutiques to achieve a competitive advantage, there exists a current deficiency in the empirical investigation of this phenomenon. Past research efforts have explored the post-pandemic bridal industry, aiming to gain an understanding of the assorted trends, traditions, and aspects within bridal sectors in different nations (Jones et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022; Pywell & Probert, 2022; Reed & Brunson, 2021). However, a recurring constraint in these studies is their inclination to depict all entities in the global bridal industry, encompassing those in the US and globally, as homogenous. This depiction often fails to acknowledge a crucial differentiation: (local) bridal boutiques, in particular, hold a distinctive position within the broader bridal sector (Jones et al., 2022; Reed & Brunson, 2021). For instance, Jones et al. (2022) conducted a study to analyze the emergence of bridal trends on a global scale and to examine how traditional physical bridal stores can discern and comprehend these trends to endure competition from online bridal retailers. Nevertheless, their investigation did not specifically focus on the distinctive context of local bridal boutiques within the United States, particularly in terms of the resources they possess for survival and attaining a competitive edge in the post-pandemic landscape.

In their study, Bornman and Steenkamp (2023) conducted an investigation into the adjustments undertaken by wedding vendors in South Africa to navigate the obstacles brought about by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Their research placed a special emphasis on the application of creativity, innovation, networking, and advertising as strategies employed by wedding vendor entrepreneurs to gain a competitive advantage. It is worth noting, however, that their study did not specifically address the context of bridal boutiques, similar to the limitation observed in Jones et al. (2022). Moreover, it’s crucial to recognize that the socio-political, geographical, and economic milieu of South Africa differs significantly from that of the US. Given the unique attributes of local bridal boutiques, there arises a strong imperative for specialized research directed at these enterprises. Consequently, the primary aim of this investigation was to employ the Resource-Based Theory (RBT) framework to cultivate a comprehensive understanding of the resources held by local bridal boutiques and the manner in which these resources play a pivotal role in facilitating their achievement of a competitive edge within the post-pandemic landscape.

2.4. Conceptual framework: Resource-Based Theory (RBT)

RBT of the firm/business focuses on the business’s internal resources and attributes to understand how it differentiates itself from other businesses and achieves sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2011). Business resources can be defined as the available factors or

inputs such as assets, capabilities, organizational values and attributes, information, and knowledge that are owned or controlled by a business (Barney, 1991; Barney et al., 2011; Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022). Resources can be both tangible and intangible (Shibin et al., 2020). Tangible resources are the physical and financial values of a business, whereas intangible are the non-physical factors (e.g., skill sets, training, reputation, and awards; Barney et al., 2011). These resources help a business implement innovative strategies and business planning that improves efficiency and effectiveness. Additionally, a business's ability to develop unique and distinctive resources increases its capability to adjust to the changing business environment and improves its survival prospects (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022). According to Barney (1991), resources need to have four attributes to impact the sustained competitive advantage of a business: (a) valuable resources, meaning these resources can increase the efficiency of the firm and neutralize any threats; (b) rare resources, meaning these resources are not easy to achieve or establish and there is always a scarcity for these resources; (c) difficult to imitate resources, meaning these resources require certain skills and expertise to develop so that competitors cannot imitate them; and (d) non-substitutable resources, meaning there are almost no alternative ways to develop or possess these resources (Barney, 1991).

The RBT is widely known as one of the most prominent frameworks for analyzing, explaining, and predicting organizational relationships and has been used in many small business and entrepreneurship studies to identify the key resources of those businesses (Fakhreddin & Foroudi, 2022). For instance, Kellermanns et al. (2016) applied RBT and emphasized the significance of resources as the foundational element in their study. They conducted a content analysis that compared how researchers and practicing entrepreneurs conceptualize resources, aiming to identify both commonalities and distinctions between established theory and entrepreneurial practice. In their study, Campbell and Park (2017) employed resource-based theory (RBT) to forecast the performance of small businesses in various sectors, encompassing retailing and service-based industries. They propose that resources like social capital, entrepreneurial orientation, intellectual capital, and effective management of the community as a stakeholder collectively influence the performance of small businesses. Overall, the concepts of RBT have played a crucial role in establishing a robust theoretical foundation for our study within the local bridal boutique business sector.

3. Methodology

To explore the business resources of local bridal boutiques, a qualitative interview approach was employed. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) defined qualitative research as a method focused on involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter and suggested using this method when the research questions require an in-depth analysis, and little is known about the topic. Given the limited research conducted on local bridal boutiques, employing a qualitative approach enabled this study to gain an in-depth understanding of these businesses. A grounded theory, which involves the construction of theory through systematic data collection, was used as an analytical approach to discover repeated emergent concepts, ideas, or elements through a coding process (Heath & Cowley, 2004).

3.1. Sample selection

The participants of this study were located in the state of West Virginia, which has a population close to 1.8 million and a median household income of \$48,037 (Lego & Deskins, 2020). The fashion retail sector of West Virginia, which mostly consists of local fashion boutiques, contributed 37% of total state jobs in 2017, impacting the social and financial infrastructure of this state (Swazan & Das, 2022). Participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling. The Data Axle Reference Solutions (also known as ReferenceUSA) database was used to acquire a list of bridal boutique businesses operating in West Virginia (Data Axle Reference Solutions, 2022). Researchers have been using this database for many years to get information on US businesses (Baron & Tang, 2011; Chetty et al., 2020). The list of bridal boutique businesses in West Virginia was obtained through an advanced search option in the database by choosing the location/state: West Virginia, number of employees: less than 500, major industry/group: retail trade sector, category

56: apparel & accessories store from the retail trade sector, and lastly filtering the bridal businesses with Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code: 5621-04 (Bridal Shops). A total of 31 bridal boutique businesses were found from that advanced search. Each business was then analyzed individually from the database to identify whether it qualified as a local (private) bridal boutique, and a total of 17 local bridal boutiques were identified.

These 17 bridal boutique businesses were contacted after getting approval from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB; Protocol: 2204555136). Participants for this study were the owners and managers of those local bridal boutiques. The researcher contacted the participants in person, by email, and through phone calls to secure an appointment for the interview. Among these 17 businesses, 9 agreed to participate, and interviews were conducted with them.

3.2. Data collection

The interviews for this study followed a semi-structured format to allow the interviewees to have a fair degree of freedom in what to talk about and how much to talk about. This approach was deemed necessary to thoroughly address the research questions (Hogans & Lyu, 2022; Mughal et al., 2021; Tavory, 2020). The interview questions were open-ended and guided by the RBT, which emphasized aspects such as business skills, business key factors, business policies, business operation strategies during the pandemic, and their general opinion about the bridal boutique business condition.

To explore and answer the initial part of our research question, which aimed to identify the valuable resources held by local bridal boutiques, we employed specific inquiry questions (i.e., based on the theory) during our research. Some of these questions, tailored to uncover the resources possessed by local bridal boutiques, were as follows: (a) What is unique about your business that your competitor would find hard to imitate? (b) According to you, what makes your business successful? (c) What brands do you carry? Do you have any private labels? Do you offer any unique designer clothing lines that set your boutique apart? (d) What additional services do you offer to your customers? Are there any services that make you unique from retail chain bridal boutiques? (e) Are there any social media pages like Facebook, or Instagram for your business? If yes, then, how do you use them? (f) What type of employees do you have (part-time, full-time, seasonal, interns, etc.), and how do you recruit and utilize them? (g) How has COVID-19 affected your business, and what measures have you taken due to the pandemic crisis?

Furthermore, we formulated specific questions (i.e., based on the theory) to address the latter portion of our research inquiry, aiming to unravel how these resources propel their quest for attaining a competitive advantage. Sample questions comprised: (a) How do you obtain or maintain the uniqueness that you mentioned, and how does it help you to become competitive? (b) How does having unique designer line dresses help you to grow your business? (c) How is your present business environment in this post-pandemic era (consumer safety, sanitization, business hours, employee satisfaction)? (d) How has COVID-19 changed your relationship with consumers, and how you are adapting to these changes? (e) How do the Small Business Administration and the government policies (like PPP loans and stimulus checks) affect your business?

All the interviews were conducted on the business premises and with the permission of the interviewees. The interviews started by asking for demographic information about the participant's association with the business and business history. The researchers made sure that the participant could attend to any customer or other business issues during the interview and took necessary pauses when needed. The researchers were familiar with West Virginia's small businesses as well as its culture from previous research and academic experience and set aside all biases before conducting the interviews to prioritize participants' opinions. Each interview lasted between approximately 30 minutes and 80 minutes and was recorded using an audio recorder with the interviewee's consent. Following the IRB guidelines, no personal identifier questions were asked

Table 1. Participants and interview information

Participant name	Role	Company name	Years of operation	No. of employees	Interview duration
Linda	Owner	ABC Bridal Store	8	2	47 min
Olivia	Owner	BCD Bridal Shop	3	7	36 min
Ashley	Manager	CDE Bridal Boutique	14	4	55 min
Ava	Owner	DEF Bridal Shop	40	6	59 min
Leo	Owner	MNO Bridal & Prom	8	3	54 min
Grace	Manager	NOP Boutiques	4	1	69 min
Mia	Owner	OPQ fashion	6	4	56 min
Jacob	Owner	PQR Bridal Clothing	8	2	51 min
Freddie	Owner	QRS Bridal and Prom	16	3	46 min

during the interviews (Tavory, 2020). Pseudonyms were given to the participants and their businesses. Table 1 shows the participants and interview information.

3.3. Data analysis

In the transcription process, we utilized the Microsoft Word transcribe feature to generate a complete textual representation of the interview recordings. This software facilitated our ability to add annotations, apply codes to the text, conduct keyword searches, and systematically structure the data. Our data analysis approach encompassed both deductive and inductive coding techniques, employing constant comparison with our research inquiries and theoretical framework to fortify the analytical process and unearth novel insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Deductive coding, rooted in established theories and concepts from prior research, was employed to assess and validate the theories outlined in existing literature, as aligned with our comprehensive literature review (Martindale & McKinney, 2020). Our coding categories, derived from previous studies and the underpinning theoretical framework, were instrumental in investigating the organizational resources of local bridal boutiques. These categories encompassed: (a) the educational background of business owners (McBee-Black, 2021), (b) experience in business operations (Alekseev et al., 2023; Baptista et al., 2020), (c) customer satisfaction (Sumiati, 2020), (d) the business reputation within the local community (Eckert et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2011), and (e) business planning (Alekseev et al., 2023).

Furthermore, we incorporated an inductive approach, where the first and second authors identified contextual commonalities and differences across the transcripts, which helped to group them in a logical order to commence the coding process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tavory, 2020). During this phase, the interview transcript was evaluated in a way that the words and phrases that conveyed similar meanings were identified and labeled with codes (Saldan̄a, 2016). Several new codes emerged from this inductive coding, such as flexible payment policy, easy return policy, store interior, etc. Overall, the inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the interview data using a grounded theory approach that provided new information on the local bridal boutique resources (Martindale & McKinney, 2020). Following this, in the next round of coding, we refined and finalized the coding guide, drawing from both deductively generated codes derived from existing literature and inductively generated codes from our data analysis process.

Lastly, we proceeded to organize the final codes by engaging in a comparison and consolidation exercise, a technique recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2017). This involved the three

authors coming together to identify patterns and connections among the codes. For example, the code *local event participation* was grouped with similar codes into the subcategory of *community involvement*. Then, the subcategory of *community involvement* was grouped into the category of *social capital development*, which was then grouped with other categories of business owners' and managers' skills into the emergent theme of *boutique owners' skills, characteristics, and innovation*.

To ascertain the reliability of our coding process, we calculated intercoder reliability (ICR) by having each researcher independently code nine transcripts using the inductively generated codes. The ICR stood at 92.37 percent, surpassing the widely accepted threshold of 80 percent (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020; Saldan̄a, 2016), indicating a high level of agreement among the coders. To further enhance the validity of our findings, we employed our comprehensive codebook to triangulate data within each coding category, a practice consistent with established research protocols (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, we incorporated participant feedback to corroborate the validity of our data and interpretations, aligning with the principles outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017).

4. Results

The analysis of the interview data led to the identification of nine resources that contribute to the competitive advantage of local bridal boutiques. These resources were further categorized into three main themes: (a) boutique owners' skills, characteristics, and innovation; (b) formal business strategies and services; and (c) pandemic-specific resources. These three overarching themes provide insights and answers to the research question posed in this study.

4.1. Boutique owners' skills, characteristics, and innovation

This theme explores how the skills, characteristics, and innovative qualities of business owners contribute as resources to the competitive advantage of local bridal boutiques. Within this theme, three resources are identified: bridal business knowledge and experience, social capital development, and human and financial capital development.

4.1.1. Bridal design knowledge and business experience

In our analysis, it was observed that a substantial majority of bridal boutique owners and managers (7 out of 9) possessed educational backgrounds and practical experience closely aligned with the domains of fashion, textiles, or business management. Motivated by their passion for this industry, these individuals embarked on the journey of establishing their own bridal boutiques, effectively integrating the wealth of knowledge and experience they had accumulated into the fabric of their business operations. This strategic incorporation of educational and practical insights played a pivotal role in the development of robust and highly competitive entities within the bridal boutique business sector. One boutique owner, in particular, who held a master's degree in fashion design and boasted eight years of practical experience in business operations, underscored the paramount importance of quality within the bridal business landscape. Reflecting on her educational background and extensive experience, she emphasized her ability to meticulously source premium-quality products for her boutiques and cater to the diverse demands of her clientele. This perspective is illustrated through the following interview excerpt:

We did a great job picking fine quality products and transformed what was like a junior kind of young store into a more high-class fashion upper-end, thanks to my design degree and experience, which made me everything today. (Linda)

Beyond the acquisition of high-quality products, familiarity with design principles empowered numerous owners and managers of local bridal boutiques to act as personalized design consultants. This role involved guiding customers towards optimal product selections, enhancing the significance of their special occasion. This fusion of design knowledge and hands-on experience cultivated a robust skill set among the owners and managers, constituting a pivotal factor in their attainment of a competitive advantage.

4.1.2. *Social capital development*

Bridal boutique owners and managers (7 out of 9) described their involvement within their local communities and customer base. They actively maintained a presence on social media platforms dedicated to their businesses, enabling them to engage with both their customer base and other members of the local community. Notably, one boutique owner who utilized a Facebook page for her business underscored that her primary intention was to use this online platform as a means of communication rather than a direct selling channel. She perceived it as an effective tool for disseminating information about the latest collections, services, and updates pertaining to her business. This perspective is encapsulated in the following interview excerpt:

I try to attend all the community events and also contribute by donating or sponsoring events. I also have a social media page for my business to connect with local people. I think that what social media does is it helps remind people that we're here and this is our product and services that we offer. (Ashley)

Furthermore, bridal boutique owners and managers actively immersed themselves in various social activities, encompassing endeavors such as organizing charitable fundraisers, fashion shows, and health awareness campaigns, among others. Notably, they extended their support by sponsoring local or regional fashion events, including the Miss West Virginia Pageant and the West Virginia Beauty Pageant Contest. This strategic sponsorship served as a means of enhancing their brand's reputation, fortifying their standing in the community, and solidifying their social capital development.

4.1.3. *Human and financial capital development*

For bridal boutique owners and managers (7 out of 9), the development of their human and financial capital is one of the major resources that drives their business. They adopt a multifaceted approach to enriching their human capital by embracing a workforce that includes both seasoned professionals and individuals with a fervor for the bridal industry, fostering a familial atmosphere within their establishments. Furthermore, they actively invest in training programs designed to enhance the skills and expertise of their novice employees in areas such as design, sewing, and marketing, effectively transforming them into valuable human resources. One boutique owner, responsible for overseeing seven employees, personally dedicates herself to training a significant portion of her staff. She firmly believes that this hands-on training imparts practical knowledge and invaluable experience, thereby facilitating the professional growth and development of new or less experienced employees, ultimately shaping their future careers. This perspective is aptly conveyed in the following interview excerpt:

We have at least six or seven highly skilled employees both part-time and full time to operate the business smoothly. Also, I always took student interns or new graduates who have a passion for bridal businesses. I always try to manage some of my time to train them by myself to develop their skill and expertise in this business. This in turn has helped me to grow my business. (Olivia)

To achieve financial stability, bridal boutique owners and managers apply for loans from the Small Business Administration (SBA), which is a government agency that provides support to entrepreneurs and small businesses and from the state government. They also look for angel investors who can provide a constant financial backup for their business in exchange for low-interest rates or ownership equity. However, most of the time, these investors are their family members who provide them with financial assistance without any interest or ownership equity. One boutique owner who faced challenges in paying the store's rent during the pandemic acknowledged the continuous financial support provided by her family members. This support played a crucial role in stabilizing the business financially following the period of lockdown. This viewpoint is effectively expressed in the subsequent interview excerpt:

My parents and my husband supported me both mentally and financially during the whole time (COVID-19 pandemic) to run my store. My husband saved some money for my business which was very helpful during the initial pandemic lockdown. Along with that, I was in touch with the SBA to get any kind of loan or financial support. (Mia)

The cultivation of financial capital through this approach assisted local bridal boutiques in weathering the pandemic-induced lockdowns and establishing a formidable competitive stance in comparison to retail chain bridal boutiques.

4.2. Formal business strategies and services

This theme reveals how formal business strategies and services enabled these local bridal boutiques to achieve a competitive advantage. This theme encompasses the resources of festive interior and environment, designer line dress collections, and alteration services.

4.2.1. Festive interior and environment

For local bridal boutiques (7 out of 9), the store interior is one of the most important visual parts of their business, as shopping for the bridal dress is highly emotional, and emotional responses are often provoked by aesthetics. The participants framed their boutiques as “wedding platforms” where customers could get a real feel for the wedding environment. The bridal boutiques have a specific room or space that has wedding-style lighting, music, and decorations with a lot of mirrors so future brides can see themselves wearing the wedding dress from every angle. The boutiques also provide accessories such as high heels, jewelry, backless bras, and make-up accessories for future brides to see how they would look on their special day. For instance, one boutique owner with 40 years of experience in the industry, emphasized the significance of aesthetic store interiors and expressed her commitment to ensuring a flawless customer experience. Her extensive knowledge in the bridal boutique business has enabled her to strive for perfection in every aspect of the event, as shown in this interview excerpt:

When you enter our store, you will definitely get a family feeling as well as a wedding. We have separate spaces where customers can sit with their friends and family to talk about their dresses and stuff. We have special lighting in our store that you can find in a wedding ceremony to replicate the wedding day. We also provide all the accessories that go with the bridal dress to create a bridal feel. (Ava)

Recognizing the often time-consuming process of bridal shopping, these boutiques extend a thoughtful touch by offering wine or champagne to customers and their entourages. This gesture not only enhances the shopping experience but also provides an opportunity for the bridal party and family members to celebrate and create cherished memories while selecting the perfect attire for the special occasion.

4.2.2. Unique bridal dress collections

Every single local bridal boutique (9 out of 9) carries an extensive range of designer lines and branded products renowned for their distinctive designs, setting them apart from the offerings found in retail chain bridal boutiques. This finding aligns with expectations, given the well-established reputation of bridal dresses for their higher price range. Bridal customers, as corroborated by earlier research (Howard, 2010), consistently prioritize superior quality and unique designs when selecting their wedding attire. Consequently, concerns about the cost of their wedding gown are relatively minor compared to their routine clothing expenses. In essence, they aspire to invest in the finest gown that their budget allows, aiming for nothing less than the best. As per insights shared by a boutique manager with 14 years in the bridal industry, their strategy involves offering exclusive designer lines from both the US and Europe. This approach attracts customers with one-of-a-kind dresses that remain beyond the reach of conventional retail chain bridal boutiques. In a bid to elevate the overall customer experience, they also extend the option of personalized, made-to-order designer dresses from these prestigious brands, as shown in this interview excerpt:

We represent a lot of different brands/lines that are very exclusive, and 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. Every one of my customers is special to me, and I provide them the dresses that are unique and one-of-a-kind. (Ashley)

4.2.3. *Alteration service*

Every bride wants their bridal dress to be perfectly fitted to their body; however, it is difficult to find that perfect-sized dress. To meet the desires of brides who seek perfectly fitted bridal dresses, local bridal boutiques prioritize their customization and alteration services to differentiate themselves from retail chain bridal boutiques. Within the local bridal boutiques, a majority (6 out of 9) have dedicated alteration equipment and employ skilled seamstresses. These seamstresses operate within the boutique premises, equipped with their own workstations, allowing them to provide immediate and on-site customization services to customers. This arrangement ensures accurate fitting of the dresses and facilitates real-time adjustments as per the customers' preferences. One boutique owner, who manages a team of seven employees, including two skilled seamstresses, emphasized the importance of on-the-spot customization in her business. She highlighted how this service distinguishes her business and greatly benefits customers by ensuring an optimal fitting of their dresses immediately. Furthermore, she goes the extra mile by arranging for her seamstresses to visit customers' homes in the local area for any emergency last-minute alterations, as shown in this interview excerpt:

We provide excellent in-store alterations services to customers so that they can have their perfect dress with a perfect fitting. This has been a game changer for our business and attracted a lot of local as well as out-of-state customers. If needed, we sometimes send our seamstresses to our customer's places. (Olivia)

4.3. *Pandemic-enforced resources*

This theme reveals how the COVID-19 pandemic forced the local bridal boutiques to develop new resources and update the old ones to achieve a competitive advantage. This theme consists of three resources: the social media revolution, contemporary strategic policies, and business collaboration and skill development.

4.3.1. *Social media revolution*

During the COVID-19 pandemic, local bridal boutiques experienced a breakdown in communication with their customers, particularly those boutiques that primarily operated through physical stores without an online presence. As a response to this challenge, the majority of bridal boutiques (8 out of 9) proactively leveraged various social media platforms as a vital resource both before and after the pandemic lockdown to reestablish and strengthen their connections with their customer base. They established business profiles on popular platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and even TikTok, engaging in consistent communication with their local communities through these digital channels. One boutique owner, who previously relied on a website but lacked a social media presence, underscored the importance of updating her website and creating new social media profiles to expand her outreach and attract a wider audience, as highlighted in this interview excerpt:

We had to update our business website because it was very old and did not have the latest business updates. I mean, our business grew during the pandemic because of that website and all the social media pages that I created. We were trying to reach as many people as possible. (Olivia)

4.3.2. *Strategic policies: home delivery and product return*

The majority of local bridal boutiques (6 out of 9) demonstrated a commitment to creating a seamless shopping experience for their customers, going beyond traditional outreach strategies by implementing strategic policies that served as valuable resources for their businesses. Among these initiatives was the introduction of home delivery services, which enabled customers to conveniently place orders for dresses through the boutique's online website, using a size chart, and have their chosen dresses delivered directly to their specified addresses. Notably, many of

these local deliveries were personally conducted by the boutique owners and managers themselves, a cost-effective measure aimed at benefiting their businesses.

In addition to that, these boutiques also adopted a return policy for their dresses, marking a significant departure from their prior business practices. This change was particularly noteworthy because bridal dresses are typically customized to fit individual customers and had not been subject to return policies before the pandemic. A boutique owner with 16 years of business experience, who implemented a return policy for the first time during the pandemic, acknowledged the challenges people faced, including changes in food habits and body shapes during lockdowns. Consequently, following the lockdown, this owner introduced an enhanced return policy, allowing customers to return products within 30 days of purchase, as evident in this interview excerpt:

The pandemic has changed the food habits of all people, which impacted their body shapes continuously. I can understand that. So, if someone brings the dress back to me before the event and really puts on some weight or they've lost weight and the dress doesn't fit, they can return or exchange it for something else, and I'll do that. (Freddie)

4.3.3. *Business collaboration and skill development*

Following the pandemic lockdown, the prevailing trend among local bridal boutiques (7 out of 9) was the formation of strategic business partnerships with other local fashion enterprises, which entailed close collaboration and resource-sharing for mutual benefit. These businesses, located in proximity to each other, established a shared supply chain to introduce fresh product offerings into their respective stores. Furthermore, they jointly explored and pursued various sources of financial support, including state, federal, and private small business loans, thereby ensuring collective financial stability and resilience during uncertain times. In addition to these collaborative efforts, boutique owners and managers actively sought opportunities to enhance their knowledge and skills throughout the pandemic. They participated in professional training programs covering various aspects of business operations, human resource management, and marketing strategies, among other relevant areas. While one boutique owner acknowledged the challenges of acquiring new knowledge at her age, her determination was evident as she sought to safeguard her business, as indicated in this interview excerpt:

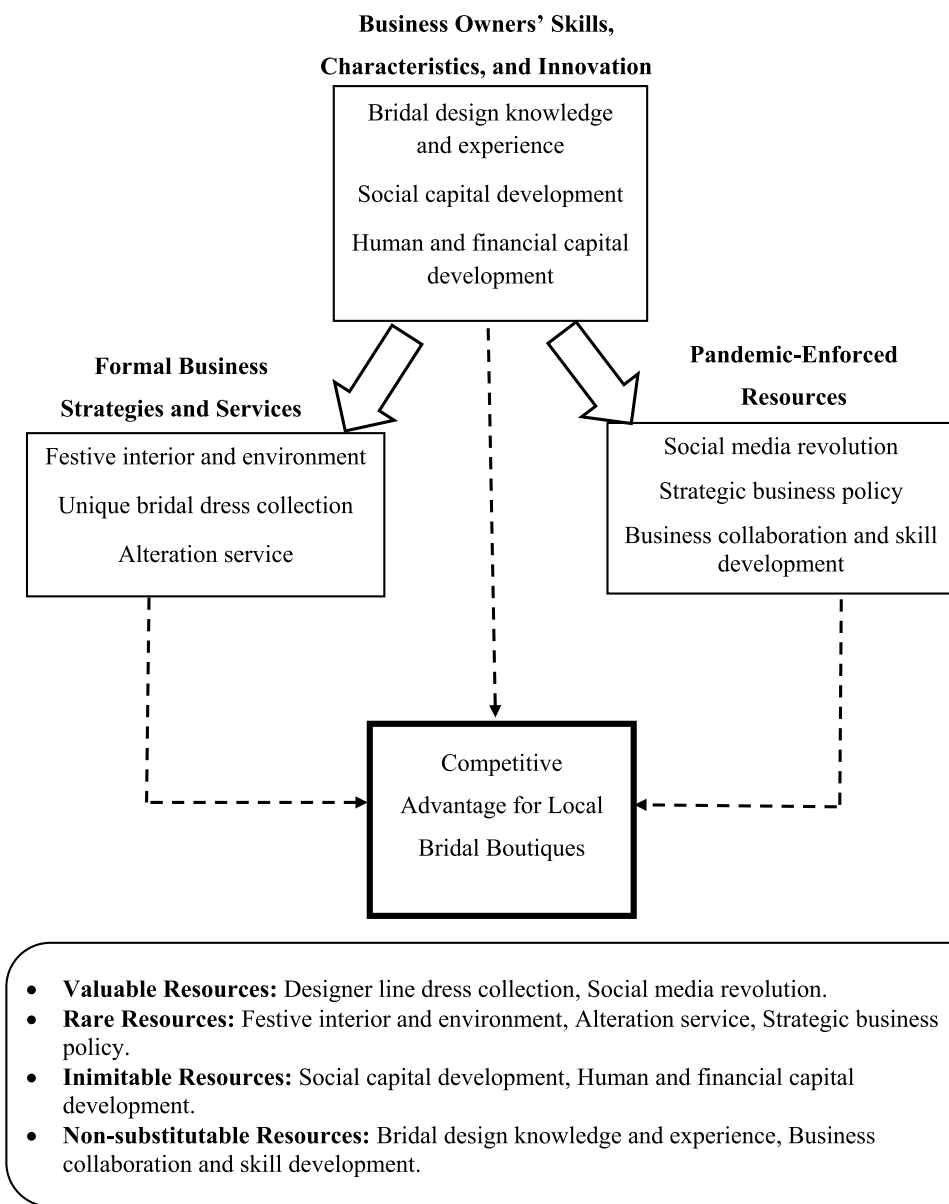
It was definitely hard for me to learn new things at my age, especially from the online courses. I took training on sales and online marketing to learn new business techniques so that I can implement those in my business and survive. (Linda)

Finally, we developed a competitive advantage model specifically tailored to local bridal boutiques, which is visually represented in Figure 1. This model serves to elucidate the key emergent themes and resources extracted from our data analysis. The foremost theme revolves around the skills, characteristics, and innovative approaches of boutique owners and managers. Within this overarching theme, three distinct resources were identified, namely, knowledge and experience in the bridal boutique business, the cultivation of social capital, and the development of human and financial capital. These resources were notably emphasized by our participants due to their pivotal role in facilitating the emergence of the other two major themes: formal business strategies and services, as well as resources specifically adapted to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The amalgamation of these three major themes collectively contributes to the local bridal boutiques' ability to secure a competitive advantage.

5. Discussion

The bridal boutique industry has undergone significant transformations, with weddings evolving from traditional communal celebrations of marriage to consumer-driven events. This shift has prompted local entrepreneurs to establish their own bridal boutiques in order to meet the

Figure 1. Competitive advantages for local bridal boutiques.



demands of the local customer base. In this highly competitive sector, these local bridal boutiques are constantly engaged in acquiring new resources and enhancing existing ones to secure a competitive edge against the retail chain bridal stores. Therefore, the principal objective of our study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the resources possessed by local bridal boutiques and their pivotal role in facilitating the attainment of a competitive edge within the post-pandemic landscape by utilizing the RBT framework. The principles of RBT guided the formulation of the interview questionnaire and provided a robust theoretical foundation for comprehending the local bridal boutique resources contributing to competitive advantage.

Our research outcomes have underscored the significance of the knowledge and expertise possessed by boutique owners as pivotal resources that empower local bridal boutiques to secure a competitive edge. This advantage stems from the ability of boutique owners to draw upon their accumulated insights and practical know-how, which enables them to make informed decisions and adapt to evolving market trends. This knowledge and experience serve as a foundational pillar

for the competitiveness of local bridal boutiques, distinguishing them in a crowded marketplace. This finding aligns with prior research conducted on local (fashion) businesses, which has also emphasized the significance of business owners' knowledge and experience in achieving success (Dabić et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2011; Sahut et al., 2021). However, our study goes beyond these previous findings by highlighting the additional importance of having a fashion design degree in establishing competitiveness. The possession of a fashion degree has proven to be instrumental for local bridal boutique owners, enabling them to offer specialized expertise to their customers. This expertise not only allows them to provide accurate guidance but also helps them to stand out from retail chain bridal boutiques. As posited by RBT, this advantage is underpinned by a non-substitutable resource—comprising individualized knowledge and experience—making it impractical to replicate or equalize this level of expertise and aptitude (Barney, 1991).

The findings of our study also demonstrated that bridal boutique owners actively develop and build various forms of capital resources. Specifically, they focus on enhancing social capital through the establishment and maintenance of valuable networks and relationships. Additionally, they invest in human capital by continuously improving their own and their employees' skills and expertise. Furthermore, they manage and allocate financial capital strategically to support business growth and reach new customer segments. In their operational framework, these businesses predominantly adopt servant leadership methodologies guided by extant research (Zoghbi-Manrique de Lara & Ruiz-Palomino, 2019), which posits that such leadership styles contribute to the augmentation of both employee and organizational social capital (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2023). The implementation of these servant leadership approaches, focused on capital development, serves as a distinguishing factor for these enterprises within the competitive landscape of retail chains, concurrently enhancing customer service quality (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2021).

However, our study contributes novel insights by presenting empirical evidence that pinpoints tailored strategies for capital development relevant to the bridal boutique sector, such as investing in local community events, particularly fashion events, and the training of employees with an emphasis on design consultation. The ability to nurture and augment social, human, and financial capital in this manner emerged as a resource that is difficult for comparable businesses to duplicate, consistent with the principles outlined in the RBT framework, particularly emphasizing the notion of inimitability (Barney, 1991). Consequently, this contributes to the attainment of a competitive advantage.

These skills and characteristics of boutique owners have resulted in the development of robust business strategies and service offerings. Local bridal boutiques strive to create a warm and familial atmosphere within their stores, offering customers a sense of comfort and familiarity. Consequently, these boutiques have harnessed this unique resource of festive atmosphere, enhancing the overall wedding shopping experience for their clientele. Furthermore, they have cultivated another distinctive resource by curating a collection of prestigious designer dresses from both the US and Europe, distinguishing them from retail chain bridal boutiques. Prior research on bridal fashion businesses has established that offering a diverse range of products contributes to their competitiveness, a finding that aligns with the results of our study (Clarke et al., 2012; Reed & Brunson, 2021). However, our study has unearthed a fresh insight, which involves the creation of a festive in-store ambiance and the provision of personalized dress customization services for individual customers. Notably, these elements have not been previously documented in the existing literature. The attainment of a festive ambiance and alteration is a challenging feat for other retail chain bridal establishments due to their formal business environment. According to the RBT, these serve as rare resources that enhance the competitive advantage of local bridal boutiques (Barney, 1991). Additionally, having a unique designer line dress collection acts as a valuable resource, according to RBT, as this can increase competitiveness by attracting more local customers as well as customers from outside the state (Barney, 1991).

Finally, local bridal boutiques demonstrated innovation by introducing new resources to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They established a significant resource in the form of business pages on multiple social media platforms and utilized them to share visual content, including photos and videos showcasing their products and services, and actively addressed customer inquiries and comments. Moreover, local bridal boutiques implemented various contemporary strategies, such as home delivery and a return policy, which were previously uncommon in this bridal boutique business sector. These actions not only helped them successfully navigate the crisis but also granted them a competitive edge in the industry by adapting to changing customer needs and adopting a more flexible, customer-centric approach.

These findings are in harmony with prior research on small or local fashion businesses, which underscored the importance of home delivery and return services in ensuring survival during and after the pandemic (Belitski et al., 2022; Miller et al., 2022). However, our research contributes a unique perspective by highlighting the novel practice of business collaboration and resource sharing with other local enterprises as a means of gaining competitiveness after the pandemic lockdown. As per RBT, effective utilization of social media constitutes a valuable asset, enhancing sales and safeguarding against permanent closure (Barney, 1991). Furthermore, contemporary strategic policies, despite their difficulty in implementation in the bridal business, are categorized as rare resources, while business collaboration and skill enhancement are considered non-substitutable resources within the RBT framework. These distinct resources collectively play a substantial role in establishing a competitive advantage for local bridal boutiques (Barney, 1991).

6. Conclusion

The study findings have two theoretical contributions. First, this study adopted RBT as the theoretical framework and expanded its applicability by exploring a previously unexplored domain. Bridal boutique businesses have unique characteristics and challenges, and using RBT to explore how they leverage their resources for competitive advantage can extend the applicability of this theory beyond its traditional domains. The findings of this study align with and extend the fundamental tenets of the theory, which posit that a combination of internal resources that possess value, rarity, inimitability, and non-substitutability contribute to the attainment of competitive advantage of bridal boutiques. Second, the study can identify and elucidate resources that are particularly relevant in the bridal boutique sector. This extends RBT by showcasing how specific types of social capital, human capital, or unique product offerings (i.e., designer dresses) contribute to competitive advantage in this niche industry. Furthermore, the study can contribute by offering a practical framework for applying RBT in niche sectors to guide future researchers in using RBT to analyze resource-based competitive advantages in industries that have not received much attention.

The study findings also have managerial implications. First, local bridal boutique owners can use the insights from this study to develop and refine resource strategies tailored to their unique context. This may involve further investment in human capital, social capital, and financial capital, as well as the development of a strategy for leveraging these resources effectively. Moreover, recognizing the importance of the owner's knowledge and experience, boutique owners can invest in continuous learning and development to enhance their expertise, which can be a valuable resource in decision-making and customer service. Second, given the importance of community engagement towards achieving a competitive edge over retail chain bridal boutiques, local bridal boutiques can further strengthen their ties with the local community. Collaborations with other local businesses, participation in community events, and philanthropic endeavors can enhance their social capital and reputation, ultimately attracting more customers. Lastly, the study highlights the significance of innovation and adaptation, particularly in response to external challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic. Local bridal boutiques could remain agile and open to implementing new strategies, such as home delivery and return policies, to meet customer needs and navigate crises. Furthermore, local bridal boutique owners could engage in long-term strategic planning

that incorporates resource management. This involves assessing and developing their resource portfolio to ensure sustained competitiveness.

This study also had certain limitations. This study analyzed the bridal boutique businesses only in West Virginia. Thus, may not fully capture the diversity of bridal boutique businesses in different locations as local context and market conditions can vary significantly. There are several states close to West Virginia (called “the mid-Atlantic region”) including parts of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania that could be included in this study to gain a better understanding of the firm resources possessed by these businesses. Moreover, the findings may be specific to the bridal boutique industry and might not be directly applicable to other business sectors. The unique characteristics of bridal boutiques could limit the generalizability of the results. Future research is recommended to investigate resource dynamics within bridal boutiques over time. Longitudinal studies can reveal how resource portfolios evolve and adapt in response to changing market conditions, regulatory changes, or technological advancements. Moreover, future studies may also explore the promotion of servant leadership as a managerial approach that enhances competitive advantage through the refinement of tailored services within this industry for customers.

Author details

Ishtehar Sharif Swazan¹

E-mail: isf5d@missouri.edu

ORCID ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8091-861X>

Debanjan Das²

Melissa Sherfinski³

¹ Textile and Apparel Management, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO, USA.

² Fashion Dress and Merchandising, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA.

³ Elementary & Early Childhood Education, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV, USA.

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Supplementary material

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