**Research Proposal**

The Future of Retail Pharmacy in Ireland with the Introduction of Online Marketing

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The Future of Retail Pharmacy in Ireland with the Introduction of Online Marketing

# Introduction

It has come to my knowledge that currently, Ireland’s retail pharmacy operates in a very competitive environment, and this situation is more likely to advance in the near future due to the adoption of online marketing as a new strategy in the country. Doubtlessly, this is the sector that is currently experiencing a lot of pressure due to the ever increasing level of competition (Zivic, Grujovic, & Miljojkovic, 2018). This has significantly contributed to some sense of embattlement in the pharmaceutical sector which has constituted a considerable challenge in the whole sector including the retail self-regulating pharmacies.

The pharmaceutical professionals are currently of the opinion that with the shift to online marketing strategy in the sector and the increased breadth of services offered by the retail pharmacy in recent years, there is an opportunity for the sector’s development in the near future, regardless of the increased level of competition (Ngari, 2017). With a big base of evidence expounding that retail pharmacists are the most commonly contacted professional by patients suffering from chronic diseases due to their convenience, it is argued that this can be done more easily through online business, where the pharmacist’s prescription can reach millions of people ate the same time (Saurav, 2018). With this argument in mind, it is therefore worth noting that the appetite for the provision of advanced pharmacy services in the near future in Ireland is, however, a mix.

The fundamental barrier to this development has been recognized as the high level of competition and the ability to run this online trade. It should be noted that if in case pharmacies had a different model concerning their income, they can be capable of paying for high caliber staff, and this can free up the time taken for supervision and run the online business more efficiently. On the other hand, the continued antagonism and competition within the sector is more likely to influence the consumers, and they may possibly develop a negative impression on the online pharmacy (Wilkins, et al. 2017). Furthermore, Ireland’s policy makers have not put more emphasis on promoting online retail pharmacy as it has been done in other countries, this makes this opportunity to appear less effective (Phul, Bessell, & Cantrill, 2004).

There is clear evidence, however, that the people of Ireland would wish to see retail pharmacists offering a variety of services in the internet so that many people can be served at the shortest time possible, and with limited movements (Lin et al. 2011). Moreover, the increased demand for online services in the country has also increasing: healthcare policies, changes in the population demographics and the economic environment, all these influence the high demand for online retail pharmacy services (Gallo, Zamora, & Cliquet, 2016).

This proposal presents a research that will examine the phenomenon of retail pharmacy owners’ responses concerning the challenges associated with online marketing and most importantly, it will attempt to make a contribution in the understanding of online marketing strategy, particularly in the medicinal sector. It is worth noting that research propositions will be developed on the fundamental issues in the literature. The intended research will use sources such as direct observation, literature, interviews as well as document reviews which will support the assessment and the analysis will be based on the elements of the related frameworks, this will link the obtained data with the research propositions. Generally, this will set out an approach to the intended research.

## Study Rationale

The proposed study will focus on the nature of the online retail pharmacy industry structure along with how those that have been researched relate concerning the marketing actions. Concerning the question of the nature of the structure of the industry as well as and how it is correlated to strategic actions, Kim (2015) adopted what has been referred to as the *reconstructurist view*, which gives a suggestion on how knowledge and ideas are applied in the process of creation to give out an endogenous growth for the firm.

In particular, Kim (2015) proposes that the process of creation can only occur in any firm at any time by the cognitive modernization of accessible data and elements of the market in a fundamentally new way, meaning that market structure and market boundaries exist only in Mangers/Owner/Entrepreneurs’ minds. Concerning its philosophy and following from the observations of Kim (2005) and Bryman (2014), the proposed study will adopt the position of *constructionist/subjectivist*, while at the same time assuming that social phenomena are created from the minds and resulting actions of social actors and that the aforesaid social phenomena, together with their meanings are constantly being accomplished by the social actors and in a steady state of revision.

The proposed study will recognize the development of theory on SMEs marketing evident in the proceeds and literature, in particular, with reference to the online marketing framework, seeking to test for the frameworks in the social phenomena as it has been comprehended in the proposed research and the various data sources that will be used.

Within the context of the proposed study, Gilmore (2010) pointed out that usually Mangers/Owner/Entrepreneurs collect information instinctively and as such, study approaches that permit in-depth examination of the process of decision making in the context of the situation of their business remain prominent. Moreover, she suggested that in-depth scrutiny of the management decision- making processes of Mangers/Owner/Entrepreneurs is more unlikely to stem from a research that has been administered from a distance.

The proposed study, in conformity with Gilmore (2010), will adopt the position of the *interpretivists*, with an assumption that the work of a researcher is to grasp the prejudiced meaning of social action, while retaining an empathetic attitude in seeking to comprehend how the participants make logic of the social phenomena that will be studied. While also recognizing the significance of the taking up of an empathetic stance (Bryman, 2014), the limits to this posture will recognized and the approaches concerning interpretations of the data will be collected will attempt a stance of critical reflection.

## Statement of the Problem

The importance of developing online pharmaceutical business has long been recognized in Ireland. However, many retail pharmacies are still faced with a number of challenges which may be traced to ineffective knowhow and the inability to counter the high level of competition in the industry. It should be noted that when these problems are not well managed, the result is unprofitability in the business.

In the contemporary world society, businesses are becoming more and more technically advanced. This is no doubt causing logistical challenges to many business organizations and subjects them into even more complicated problems. On the other hand, the inadequacy of the high caliber personnel, particularly in the pharmaceutical industry is more worrying because it limits the trust on the online medicinal products because customers only trust the prescriptions given by the professionals whom they can see. This fact has really proved to be a great challenge for the retail pharmacist’s online business.

In a nutshell, there is need for a better approach of dealing with this issue in order to build the trust on online medicinal business. More distinctively, there is need to address the following research questions:

**Research Questions**

1. How are the retail pharmacy owners addressing challenges that are associated with online market?
2. How may their marketing reaction be characterized?
3. How competent are the retail pharmacy owners at online marketing?

**Hypotheses**

1. Retail pharmacy owners have failed to address challenges that are associated with online marketing
2. Retail pharmacy owners lack competent personnel to run online marketing

## Research Objectives

The long term objective of the intended research is therefore to develop a formalized online business strategy that will ensure a manageable competition level in the business and above all, an approach that will re-establish the trust on the online medicinal business. Competition management is hereby defined as the process of harmonizing online business and prioritizing the patient’s needs. In particular, the following are the sub-objectives of the intended study:

1. To provide a comprehensive guidelines for operating online medicinal business.
2. To review current the current situation in the pharmaceutical industry, practices and researches in regards to the online business
3. To sketch out a conceptual framework for competition management.

The results of the intended research will be useful to the retail pharmacists as well as the general populace

# Preliminary Literature Review

The research that is being proposed herein will assess the marketing responses of the online retail pharmacy in the Ireland to the contemporary challenges associated with the business. In summary, the proposed research will be aimed at assessing the following:

1. How retail pharmacists in Ireland are responding to the online marketplace challenges;
2. How the role of the pharmacy professionals is being influenced by the marketing responses;
3. The degree of entrepreneurial online marketing competencies that is evident in retail pharmacy;

It has been an argument of researchers that online marketing practice in the small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) is a very specific situation (Haahti, Hall, & Donckels, 2011). Based on this argument, the proposer research will therefore try to put it clear that online marketing response of the retail pharmacies is just another type of retail Small-to-Medium Enterprise and for this reason, there is need to look at its underlying features so that its marketing response may easily be understood. For the above questions to be comprehensively addressed, the proposed research will try to review a relevant literature which will then be arranged according to the following three fundamental themes:

1. Marketing in small-to-medium enterprises **(**SMEs);
2. Marketing in online Retail SMEs;
3. Retail Pharmacy: the underlying features that affect online marketing response

The first section of the proposed research will review the literature that is related to the marketing in small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), taking into consideration, the various entrepreneurial marketing conceptualizations, and a terminology that is normally used in describing marketing in the SMEs. The second section of the proposed research will narrow its focus and become more specific to the retail online marketing and lastly the study will assess the underlying features that affect online marketing response. Thereafter, a concluding section which will draw together the strands for addressing the central research question will mark the end of the literature of the proposed research.

## Marketing in small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs)

It has been a general view that small enterprises differently approach marketing as to big firms (In Ahmad et al. 2017). Additionally, there is always a gap concerning many of the management actions which are taken by small enterprises; moreover, these small firms are very much aware of the increasing nature of the marketing relationship as well as the debate over marketing nature within the small enterprises (Nicholas, J. (2010). It has also been proposed that Small-to-Medium Enterprise type of marketing was to some extent Entrepreneurial Marketing, which is a very special style that is characterized by so many factors which may take account of a haphazard approach, simple approach as well as inherently informal approach (In North, & In Varvakis, 2016). This has really drawn an attention to the significant effect of the manager/entrepreneur/owner in an approach to marketing as well as practices of the Small-to-Medium Enterprises. The proposed study will therefore present a particular type of SME I which the marketing response will be influenced by this particularity.

It is worth noting that the features of SME marketing strategies for many SMEs have always been taken to be peripheral (Eunni et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the literature underlying the SMEs tries to identify the existence of a marketing strategy which is somehow very unique to the small enterprises (Schu, Morschett, & Swoboda, 2016), this forces these entrepreneurs to continuously update innovations.

Due to its ever-changing environment, decisions in the SME marketing are haphazardly taken and in unstructured way which results into a reactive, spontaneous and dynamic marketing practices (Murray, O'Driscoll, & Torres, 2012). It has as well been argued that the size of the business has a fundamental influence on the organizational matters as well as managerial issues which include the development of the online marketing skills (O'Dwyer, Gilmore, & Carson, 2011)

## Marketing in online Retail SMEs

The Irish online retail industry is majorly made up of small scale companies which are family owned (Eunni, Brush, & Kasuganti, 2017). Due to the fact that online retail is the country’s largest industry, online retail sales have considerably remained precarious. A research on the behavior of the consumers suggest an opinion that image and value perception have categorically shifted and that there is a sense of urgency in which the country’s online retailers should now put much focus on clarity and simplicity of the products that they offer in the online market.

A literature study of the online retail marketing in the retail SMEs is of the suggestion that localization Gedeborg et al. 2017), branding as market strategies along with the product knowledge utilization for the competitive advantage which is currently being experienced in the online retail pharmacy are doubtlessly, significant themes. Researchers have recognized online retail branding as having a very big difference from product branding (Gilmore, A., (2011).

The modern theoretical marketing approaches to the management of branding put more emphasis on the prejudiced nature of the experience (De Chernatony, 2009). In fact, Mitchell et al (2012) found that owner managers are central to the management of the brand in the online retail SMEs. He points out that online retail branding entails both functional and symbolic meaning to the owner managers and that the dynamic and multiple understanding of the Small-to-Medium Enterprises online retail brand is an idea that is derived from the owner managers. Such a literature appears to emphasize the significance of branding in SME marketing responses.

## Retail Pharmacy- underlying characteristics that influence the marketing response

Carson (2015) contends that the underlying features concerning a specific business will have an influence and determine, marketing character that is practiced in the industry. This section will, then, identify and review literature that is related to those fundamental features in an online retail pharmacy in the Ireland.

### The Pharmacy Profession and business

Online retail pharmacy is a trading profession. Pharmacy being a profession, it is more overt on portraying the merger of business and profession than any other profession (Roberts et al. 2017). As pharmacy is presently noted for the provision of other numerous services apart from the dispensation of medicine, researchers have suggested that it is not only business compatible and professionalism, but they are also synergistically linked and inextricable. Maybe going an extra mile, it has been suggested that good patient care and good business are mutually dependent variables (Wan, Chattopadhyay, & Sun, 2013). Yet some investigations have demonstrated that pharmacists consider themselves as service care providers with a retail element and not as retailers with a service element); as they seem to take pleasure in the fundamental strengths as therapeutic expert advisors and healthcare professionals (Xie, & Johnston, 2014).

This has always been complemented by a “short- termist” approach and inward looking. Moreover, it has also been found that the level of current services in Ireland community pharmacies have been perceived to be changeable, with a strong level of distress evident that the professionalism rhetoric is not always matched by the actuality. The practice of pharmacy is subject to a wide array of professional regulation (Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland, 2013) counting from the guidance in relation to the promotion, advertising, along with the sale of medicinal products. To this extent therefore, in the context of the proposed study, for instance, pharmacists will be required to make sure that work practices are in conformity with the guiding principles concerning the professional practice, including the promotion of medicinal products on basis of use of sales targets, quantity discounts, incentives and up-selling or wrong link selling of medicinal products.

### Shift in role orientation of Community Pharmacist

It has been pointed out that by the 1980s Ireland pharmacists’ professional monopoly over the manufacture, and distribution of medicinal products had been completely underestimated by the development of the industry of pharmaceuticals (Roberts et al. 2017). Roberts et al (2017) further pointed out that the shifting was due to the focus on the patient as a central purpose of the pharmacy practice. A literature for more than twenty years (Roberts, et al. 2007) now emphasized pharmaceutical care, clinical services as well as the cognitive pharmaceutical services.

A temporary Report of the Ireland Pharmacy (Porter, M., (2010), set out to review pharmacy services presently provided in Ireland and compared them against the best practice in other nations. It argued that national and international evidences show the considerable effects that pharmacists can have in health gain for patients across many areas including medication management, chronic disease management, pharmacist prescribing, minor ailments, self- care, health screening, health promotion as well as the provision of vaccination services (Haahti, Hall, & Donckels, 2011).

Coupled with this change concerning the orientation and recognition of its strategic practice /business implications (Roberts (2017), expounding on the work of Porter (2010), developed The Matrix of Pharmacy Viability; to help pharmacists assess fundamental strategic choices that are available to them in developing their online businesses. Concerning the conceptualization that online marketing in the pharmaceutical industry marks a very specific form of Small-to-Medium Enterprise marketing, the conceptualization and features have broadly been reviewed.

Online retail SME marketing that has been considered to be providing a narrower focus and literature in this regard has as well been reviewed (O Dwyer 2009). O Dwyer asserts that innovative marketing in this regard can be reactive or proactive organizational approach based on newness, refinement, product quality, image management and the formation of strategic alliances as the major constituents in the context of competitive market conditions. She suggested that future studies will have to examine the applicability of the results of her study to a variety of SMEs in various geographic locations as well as diverse industries.

Carson (2015) on the other hand has argued that as online marketing is being developed, well defined and conceptualized, including for instance, planning and strategy, marketing in the small business context in addition to industry specific online marketing. It could therefore be further asserted that some of the fundamental features of this trading profession deteriorate its hand in relation to the practice and nature of its marketing (Schmidt & Pioch, 2015). To be more specific, the research that is being proposed herein will attempt to address how online retail pharmacy owners in the Ireland are responding to current challenges in the marketplace.

# Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore the marketing response of Independent Retail Pharmacy owners to contemporaneous marketplace challenges. In particular, the study aims to explore the following questions:

1. how online retail pharmacists have been responding to the challenges in this marketplace;
2. How the pharmacy professional role has been influencing consumers’ online marketing response;
3. The degree and type of entrepreneurial marketing competencies that are evident in online retail pharmacy;
4. marketing strategies and activities that are being prioritized

The fundamental objective of this section concerning the proposed study is to set out how the research will be undertaken as well as its methodological rationale. It will set out in detail the variety of assumptions concerning the nature of that which will being researched, what comprise the acceptable knowledge, the process of the study and the proposed research’s logical basis.

## Research Design

Bryman, (2014) pointed out that research design provides a framework for data collection as well as analysis of the collected data which is used as reflection to the decisions concerning the topic under study. With this in mind, the design that will therefore be adopted for the proposed research will attempt to address to numerous tests including the following:

1. Construct strength- this will help in identifying the correct operational measures for the concepts that will be studied;
2. Internal strength- this will seek to establish a causal correlation, whereby certain conditions will be believed to be leading to other conditions.
3. External strength- this will help in defining the domain to which the proposed study’s results will be theorized;
4. Ecological strength- in this, the proposed study will be concerned with the question of whether the socio-scientific results will be applicable to people’s daily lives.
5. Demonstration of the operations of the proposed study- including the procedures of data collection, procedures- will therefore be repeated, with the same results;
6. Replication: being close to reliability, this will relate how replicable the study will be. This will depend on the clearness of procedural explanation contained in the proposed study, so as to make it possible for another researcher to conduct of the same study.

While Bryman (2014) identified the five outstanding research designs the case study design will then be chosen in the proposed research due to the question form (why and how questions?) and the nature of the proposed research area (a contemporary complex social phenomenon).

## Case Study

The case study is used in several situations to add to the knowledge of an individual, organizational, group, political, social, as well as other related phenomena where there is need to do so, to fully understand the complicated social phenomena (Yin, 2014) in an attempt to explain the unique characteristics of the case (Bryman,2014).

While Yin (2014) suggests that when the major research strategy will be qualitative in nature, a case study is helpful because it will take an inductive approach to the correlation between research and theory, *he asserts further that case study research is not necessarily allied to an inductive approach*, but case studies can be linked with both the generation of a theory as well as testing of the theory. However, other scholars also disregard the case study method (Yin, 2014). With these observations in mind, it is therefore very clear that the use of a case study will be of great significance in the proposed research.

## Data Sources

### Interviews

The most important method that will be adopted for the proposed study will be depth interviews with main informants in the industry. Respondents will be chosen on the basis of their knowledge of the sector, experience and their roles in the sector over time

### Documents

Marketing strategy documents will be very helpful in the proposed research. the analysis of such a document will therefore form part of the proposed research and in addition to this, an analysis of IPU Review, the monthly trade magazine over the past few years will conducted.

### Direct Observation

Working as a local Irish pharmacist will afford me an opportunity to collect information, especially in relation to the group formations as well as the effect of same on staff on the ground.

## Summary of the Methodology

The major goal of this section is to establish a methodological rationale that will be used in the proposed research. In terms of the rationale for the proposed adoption of *constructionist/subjectivist* assumptions, it is worth noting that the study will also adopt the interpretivist position to help in the analysis of what an acceptable response is. with respect to the online retail pharmacy in Ireland, which is the main topic for the study, the proposed research will then use a clear axiological position to draw the position of the study.

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