KEEPING UP THE FAÇADE: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT ON RETAIL WEBSITES IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract

The e-marketplace has been inundated with new retailers due to the tremendous growth of e-commerce in recent years. Small retailers, in particular, face continual challenges operating in an ever-competitive environment. Research suggests they could exploit store image as a source of competitive differentiation to set themselves apart from the other retailers. Many studies have focused on the management of consumer perceptions, but rarely did any adopt an impression management approach, given that such an approach entails fostering impressions and involves precisely the creation, maintenance and adjustment of images. The issue of how retailers manage images through their websites is, however, inadequately addressed in the extant literature. Addressing this gap is important due to the potential leverage of a retailer's image to elicit competitive advantage by inducing trust and creating value perceptions for consumers.

Grounded on dramaturgy and impression management theory, this study explored how retail websites exploit impression management tactics to shape online store images. To operationalise the inquiry, data collected from retail websites and interviews with small e-business owners and consumers in Singapore was used to examine retailers' communicative practices. The data was analysed using qualitative web content analysis as well as open, axial, and selective coding procedures.

The research found that online retailers engaged in impression management behaviour that addressed seemingly conflicting goals of persuading consumers and protecting the store from buyers' post-purchase demands. Persuasive tactics were employed during pre-purchase to portray the store as more reputable, legitimate and trustworthy than what they might be. Conversely, protective tactics construed an image of assertiveness towards averting potential challenges that might arise due to unsuccessful deliveries or product returns. Against the above backdrop, the thesis empirically developed a model illuminating a dramaturgical process of the 'backstage' transformation of web information elements into information tactics and impression management tactics, which enabled the projection of store images at the web storefront.

The original contribution of this thesis is the dramaturgical model of impression management on retail websites. The model explicated how online retailers persuade by either dramatizing or selectively disclosing information, and self-protect through information-giving tactics. The protective facet of the model was supported by assertiveness, which is a new dimension of store image. The model converged disparate bodies of literature on dramaturgy, impression management, online store image and information transparency strategy. To practitioners, the model offered four strategic actions, six information tactics and nine impression management tactics that could be deployed to project four store images and two types of web façade. The study confirmed previous research findings that retail stores depicted themselves as being reputable, legitimate and/or trustworthy. A further finding was the use of proactive, anticipatory obfuscation and excuse tactics on retail websites. This finding is consistent with prior studies that affirmed the plausibility of impression management in the online context. Besides validating three transparency actions of revelation, concealment and selective disclosure on e-commerce sites, the study introduced another action – dramatisation, to the existing set of actions.

Keywords: Impression management, online retail, store image, consumer perception, dramaturgy

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Publications

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Paper presented at conferences:

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Abbreviations

B2C	Business-to-Consumer
B2B	Business-to-Business
C2C	Consumer-to-Consumer
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IM	Impression Management
IS	Information System
OIM	Organisation Impression Management

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Research

Technology's influence on society has been a topic of interest to both academic scholars and business practitioners. The evolution of e-commerce is an example of how technology brings about unprecedented shifts in retail market structures and consumers' shopping behaviour (Hortaçsu & Syverson, 2015). The way people search, buy and pay has undergone a fundamental change since the introduction of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s. For consumers, the Internet is a haven for e-shopping. For the merchants, a web presence offers valuable business opportunities to generate brand awareness and improve sales. Nascent entrepreneurs could launch web-based start-ups quickly while traditional businesses could compete with an omni-channel strategy by extending their operations to the web as bricks-and-clicks stores.

Statistics on global retail sales volume and forecasts suggested a booming online retail industry after the dotcom crash in the late 1990s (Hortaçsu & Syverson, 2015). By the end of 2016, retail e-commerce sales worldwide was projected to reach US$1.9 trillion (eMarketer, 2016). The exponential growth of the business-to-consumer (B2C) e-commerce retail market is drawing closer to what scholars had predicted, "the future of shopping is online" (Birch, Gerbert, & Schneider, 2000, p. 9). Although digital sales accounted for only a small proportion of the total retail sales at 8.7%, its growth rate at 23.7% was considerable and indicated room for future expansion (eMarketer, 2016).

The phenomenal progress and the promising growth potential of e-commerce ignited scholars' interest to examine the factors leading to its success. Of importance among several factors is the store image. 'Store image' is defined as an overall impression (Doyle & Fenwick, 1974) of the store's personality in the minds of the shopper (Martineau, 1958). Scholars have refined the concept of store image over the years and it has evolved into a composition of the store's functional and psychological characteristics (Lindquist, 1974; Martineau, 1958) as well as consumers' attachment of meanings to them based on their knowledge and experiences with the store (Burt, Johansson, & Thelander, 2007). Conceptualised based on the established literature on the traditional store image, online store image connotes salient characteristics of e-commerce such as seller trustworthiness, privacy, security, usability and delivery performance.

Store image is widely recognised as a source of a firm's competitive differentiation (Martineau, 1958). While a big body of research provided an understanding of how businesses could develop favourable store images, rarely did the studies adopt an impression management approach, considering that impression management is about creating, maintaining and adjusting images in the minds of the target audience (Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Past studies have focused largely on branding and advertising as two common ways to communicate store image to targeted consumers. Both strategies have their merits and shortcomings. Branding strategies are targeted at the longer-term time horizon and may not yield immediate benefits. Advertising is notoriously costly and therefore, firms could consider a multi-thronged approach that encompasses impression management on corporate websites (Winter, Saunders, & Hart, 2003).

An inquiry into the development of store images that influence consumers' impressions of retail websites is important because of the potential value an online image brings to the store. Online store image is value added to e-businesses on a few fronts. First, research has suggested that evaluations of image comes before other attributes, for example, website quality, for first-time visitors (Jarvenpaa, Tractinsky, & Vitale, 2000). Consumers tend to form their first impressions of a new website quickly after assessing its interface features (such as aesthetics) and interaction features (such as usability and site navigation) through a surface inspection of the site (Toms & Taves, 2004). It only takes about 50 milliseconds for web visitors to form an opinion about the visual appeal of a website upon their first visits (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2006). The age-old belief that "what is beautiful is good" (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972) explains the influence of visual cues on perceptions. Influencing consumers' impressions of the sites through the use of image cues is therefore critical in helping them to make a decision to continue browsing, rather than exit the site. Moreover, a good first impression tends to have a long-term 'halo effect' that influences subsequent perception on trustworthiness and usability of the website (Jarvenpaa et al., 2000).

Second, consumers' first impressions of an unfamiliar website is vital in building their initial trust of the company (McKnight, Choudhury, & Kacmar, 2002). Trust building is strategically important in e-commerce environments characterised by uncertainties and dependence, as trust lowers the degree of consumers' perceived risk (Gefen, Benbasat, & Pavlou, 2008). It is therefore crucial, particularly for the new or lesser known firm to establish initial trust in consumers as their trust may determine future interactions with the firm (Koufaris & Hampton-Sosa, 2004). Projecting a favourable online store image helps to reduce consumers' risk perceptions associating with online shopping (Aghekyan-Simonian, Forsythe, Kwon, & Chattaraman, 2012; Kwon & Lennon, 2009). Website features, such as visual appeal and ease of navigation, also contribute to a positive image and act as proxies to a site's service quality, and in turn, minimises perceptions of financial risk (Keating, Quazi, & Kriz, 2009).

Third, attributes of store image contribute to the creation of value perceptions in consumers (Chang & Tseng, 2013). Online retailers can deliver value propositions for consumers in the form of utilitarian and hedonic value in e-shopping (Chang & Tseng, 2013; Overby & Lee, 2006). Utilitarian value refers to consumers' cognitive assessment of the benefits and loss in terms of economic value, time savings and convenience. Hedonic value is concerned with the experiential judgment such as entertainment, enjoyment and escapism (Overby & Lee, 2006). Of the two, utilitarian value is a stronger predictor of consumers' attitudes and intentions than hedonic value (Overby & Lee, 2006). Consumers perceptions of hedonic and utilitarian values associated with the image of the online store contribute towards their preference for the retailer (Overby & Lee, 2006) and ultimately influences their intention to purchase at the store (Chang & Tseng, 2013).

Fourth, store image is an important antecedent of online purchase intention. Previous studies have shown online store image having either a direct impact (Chen & Teng, 2013; Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2002; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009; Yun & Good, 2007) or a mediated impact through perceived risks (Aghekyan-Simonian et al., 2012) and perceived value (Chang & Tseng, 2013) on consumers' buying intent from online stores. Further, impressions of store image assist retailers to cultivate loyalty behaviours in customers, which in turn promotes profitability and store growth (Yun & Good, 2007). Specific attributes of online store image, such as website design, atmospherics, site usability and trust, are also found to influence purchase intention (Chen, Hsu & Lin, 2010; Liang & Lai, 2002; Richard, 2005).

The significance of online store image is succinctly summarised by the claim that "image is becoming everything, because it has come to define and transform our perceptual world" (Gioia, Hamilton, & Patvardhan, 2014, p. 134). Earlier marketing literature has suggested the conceptualisation of marketing as impression management since marketing activities, especially marketing communications, are impression-laden (Fisk & Grove, 1996). Two decades on, impression management has not lost its relevance and, in fact, has gained importance, consistent with the recent assertion that image plays an increasingly ascendant role in marketing (Gioia et al., 2014). Impression management has implications for the Information Systems (IS) field too. A study of impression management on retail websites (an example of an IS) is a timely response to the call for examining the communicative role of IS (Aakhus, Ågerfalk, Lyytinen, & Te'eni, 2014). The next section describes the theoretical frameworks that underpin the thesis.

1.2 Theoretical Lens

The primary theoretical lens employed to explore the development of online store images is impression management (IM) theory, that is grounded on Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective of impression management is one of the most established frameworks that are widely used to explain the presentation of self and organisations who are interested to influence the perception and behaviour of their target audience. To Goffman, social interactions between people resemble performances in the theatre, where the actor enters the stage to the presence of an audience, puts on a performance to impress, and upon completion, exits the stage. As individuals engage in interactions, two streams of communication are evident. One stream is the expressions *given* through language, while the other is the expressions *given off* through symptomatic actions (Goffman, 1959). During the interactions, the actor fosters an impression by strategically controlling information through content manipulation, information regulation, and audience segregation so as to create the desired outcome or typically, a favourable image.

To better understand retailers' use of impression management tactics, this study turns to the existing literature on organisation impression management - grounded on dramaturgy. The unit of analysis examined in the study is an online store (that is, an organisational entity), as opposed to an individual (that is, the storeowner or entrepreneur), and therefore the literature on organisation impression management is more relevant than personal self-presentation. Organisation impression management is defined as the actions taken to strategically communicate and influence the way the target audience perceive the organisation as a whole (Bolino et al., 2008). Strategies of organisation impression management are used for two primary purposes. Motivation-driven strategies are used to enhance, maintain or protect the existing corporate image, while situation-driven strategies are deployed to avoid or repair damaged images (Elsbach, Sutton, & Principe, 1998; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995).

A considerable volume of literature on organisation impression management was developed based on face-to-face interactions prior to the prevalence of e-commerce. Given that the Internet is a communication medium that is substantially different from face-to-face interactions, theories on computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Walther, 1996, 2007) are adopted to inform this study. The hyperpersonal model of CMC suggests that by exploiting technological interface and channel characteristics, online interactions could be more emotional and socially desirable than in face-to-face situations (Walther, 1996, 2007). Scholars have argued that impression management is viable on the Internet (Miller, 1995) and organisations can foster online impressions by using a growing range of expressive resources based on language, content, typography and chronemics (Walther, 1993; Walther & Parks, 2002). Having laid the theoretical underpinnings in this section, the next section describes the objectives of the study.

1.3 Research Objectives

The main objective of the research is to build a model from empirical evidence that enhances our understanding of online retailers' use of impression management tactics in shaping store image. This study develops a model based on qualitative data collected from interviews and content of websites. Since the phenomenon of impression management in an online selling context has not been previously explored in depth, the approach used in this inquiry is consistent with Creswell's (2013b) recommendation for a qualitative study. In particular, the research seeks to uncover how information is managed to form impression management tactics that ultimately project desired store images on retail websites.

The objectives of the research are to:

1. Enrich the current understanding of the firm's impression management process in an *online context*,
2. Explore how *small, under-resourced firms* manage information on their websites,
3. Ascertain the information and impression management tactics employed in *retail websites in Singapore,* and
4. Identify the *store images* construed by online retailers that are pertinent to e-shopping.

The research aims to explore how online retail stores strategically manage information and communicate impressions on their website. To that end, the research specifically addresses the following central research question:

How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store image through impression management tactics on retail websites?

The next section describes the design of the inquiry to answer the research question.

1.4 Research Methodology

The current study uses a qualitative interpretive case study methodology to explore the contemporary issue of a "how" research question and in which there was little control over the online retailers' behaviour and practices. A case study methodology is suitable for this research because of the "how" question asked (Yin, 2009) and the phenomenon under investigation in the study (that is, impression management on retail websites) is a contemporary issue in a naturalistic setting (that is, online retail) (Punch, 2014). A qualitative approach was necessary as the complex phenomenon under study deserved a rich description and explanation (Creswell, 2013a; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The use of an established methodology, a qualitative case study (Myers 1997) and an accepted paradigm by the IS community, interpretivism (Walsham, 2006) lends credibility to the study. On the contrary, a quantitative methodology would have resulted in the loss of a rich description of participants' narratives (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994) and therefore would not have met the research objective of acquiring an enriched understanding of the influences e-commerce context had on retailers' impression management behaviour.

The study followed Yin's (2009) advice on the good practices to adopt for case studies during the data collection process. The primary consideration is to have more than a single source of evidence. This study relied on two primary sources of data, interviews and web content data, as evidence. Interview data was collected via semi-structured, in-depth questioning with online retailers. The semi-structured approach was suitable for the exploratory nature of this study as it provided structure for comparability across different participants and yet allowed for the flexibility to accommodate changes during the interview process. Web content data that was collected from the retail websites of retailer participants provided corroboration with the interview data. A secondary source of data was collected from interviews with consumers.

Purposive sampling was used to select the cases and participants so as to ensure that the participants fit the study's objective (Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2008). The selection of cases was guided by replication logic and this study used literal replication to predict similar results for the cases (Yin, 2009).

Each case is an online store. To be shortlisted, an online store must be a small business based in Singapore and sells tangible consumer goods or merchandise which fall into one of these categories – apparel/fashion goods, furniture/home furnishings/housewares, DIY/hardware goods, household appliances/consumer electronics, household cleaning products, cosmetics/toiletries, food/beverages, leisure goods (including media products, toys and games), and others (including jewellery, gift items, florist and so on) (Euromonitor, 2003). As small businesses are typically characterised as under-resourced (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015), this thesis used the terms 'small' and 'under-resourced' interchangeably. Two criteria used in the selection of retailer participants were the role of participants as decision-makers of the store and that the e-business must be in operation for at least six months. Twenty-two retailers were interviewed. All except two (through phone) were face-to-face interviews that lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to enable the analysis of full and accurate narratives from the participants. The transcribed interview data was analysed using open, axial and selective coding procedures as it facilitated systematic identification of theoretical constructs from raw data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Web data was collected through the content gathering of participants' websites. The collected webpage data was analysed using content analysis, which was chosen because "a systematic coding and categorising approach" (Grbich, 2007) enabled the capturing of germane characteristics of the content (Merriam, 2009, p. 205). Another source of primary data was the interviews with consumers, which was used to corroborate with retailer interviews and web content data. Taken together, the results of the study were derived from the combined analysis and data triangulation of the interviews and web content data (see Figure 1).

The main outcome from the analysis is a dramaturgical model of impression management that explained how varying information visibility on websites could lead to tactics to manage impressions and store images in three steps. First, the visibility of web information elements (such as product description, store and privacy policies) could be varied through the actions of revealing, concealing, selectively disclosing or dramatizing information. Second, applying one of the four actions to an information element created information tactics. For example, the information tactic of extensive elaboration was created when privacy policies are revealed extensively. Conversely, complete omission of privacy policies occurred when there is a conceal action. Visual amplification, language exaggeration and figurative reinterpretation are information tactics to dramatise product description or website design. Selective disclosure is another type of information tactic that could be applied to several information elements, such as product description and store policy. Third, impression management tactics may rely on one or multiple information tactics. For example, the impression management tactic of (de)emphasising product quality was created through the combination of four information tactics – extensive elaboration, visual amplification, language exaggeration and figurative reinterpretation. Fourth, a store image was portrayed through a combination of impression management tactics. Four characteristics of store images that emerged from the findings were reputable, legitimate, trustworthy and assertive. Reputable, legitimate and trustworthy images were projected during the pre-purchase phase of consumer shopping and together they formed the persuasive facet of the model. An assertive image is targeted at the post-purchase behaviour of consumers and represented the protective facet of the model. Explained using dramaturgical concepts, the packaging of information and impression management tactics occurred at the 'backstage' of the online store, invisible and inaccessible to the consumers, whereas store images were implicitly projected on the storefront or 'front stage'. Depending on the number of store images projected, the store could be considered to be either an impressionist or minimalist.

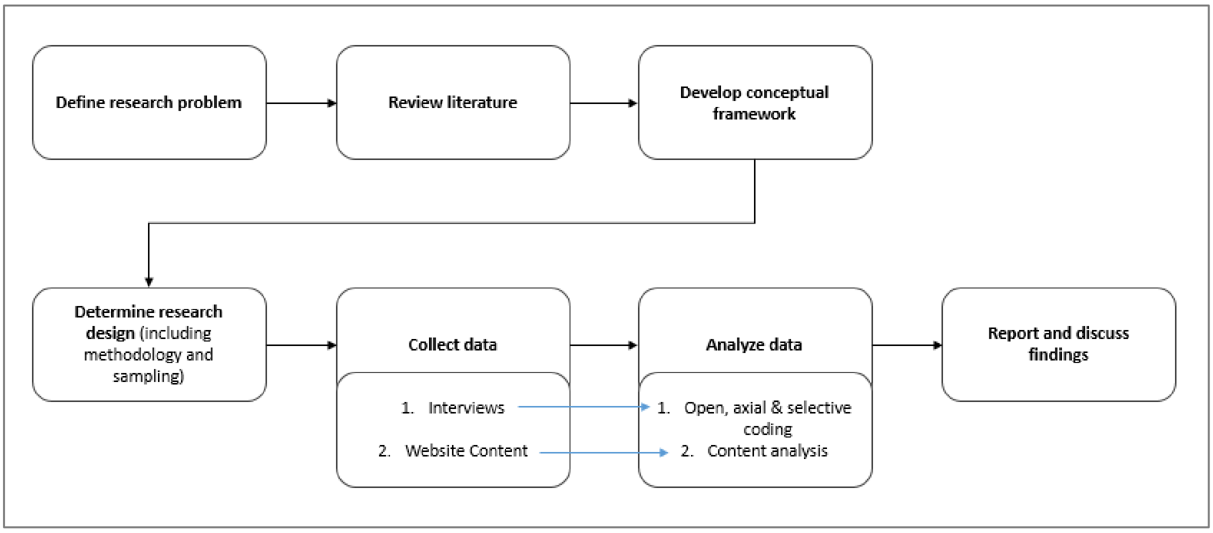

Figure 1: Research process for this thesis

1.5 Contribution to Research and Practice

The original contribution of this study is a dramaturgical model of impression management on retail websites. This study enriched the existing understanding of small retailers' marketing communications, specifically about how they leveraged existing web presence to project desired store images. Substantiating the argument that online store images can be fostered through impression management on retail websites, the model provided empirical evidence drawn from case studies of online retail stores in Singapore. The model also explicated how information can be manipulated to address two seeming conflicting goals in e-commerce – persuasion of consumers and protection of store interest. The persuasive facet of the model was achieved by presenting idealised images of the store – being reputable, legitimate and trustworthy, while the protective facet was sustained by an assertive image that averts potential challenges from buyers after purchase.

The dramaturgical model of impression management on retail websites demonstrated that similar goals can be achieved through different treatments on information. Besides exaggerating information to persuade (Da Cunha, 2013), this model suggested that information can be selectively disclosed to create favourable impressions (for example, revealing positive product attributes while omitting negative ones). Instead of information-hiding in an attempt to protect an existing image (Da Cunha, 2013), this model showed that information-giving (by explaining store policies on delivery and returns) served a similar purpose to avert challenges from the target audience.

Another contribution of this research was the conceptual connection established between three disjoint corpus of literature by integrating key concepts from online retail store image (Chang & Tseng, 2013), organisation impression management (Elsbach, 2003) and information transparency framework (Granados & Gupta, 2013). The dramaturgical process of online retailers' impression management also complemented and extended existing work in the three fields. First, the study identified assertiveness as a new dimension of online retail store image. Retailers' assertiveness was expressed in two ways, through the transfer of agency to the buyer, which in turn relieved the retailer's responsibility over the outcome of the delivery, and the appearance of bureaucracy to discourage buyer opportunism towards product return, exchange and refund. This study also validated the importance of reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness as psychological aspects of store image.

Second, the impression management tactics in this study were consistent with typologies proposed by Bolino et al. (2008) and Elsbach (2003). This study listed six persuasive tactics that fulfilled Bolino's goals of maximising good impressions. The tactic of transferring agency fits into the class of anticipatory excuse tactic (Elsbach, 2003) that aims to minimise bad perceptions (Bolino et al., 2008) while the tactic of bureaucracy belongs to the anticipatory obfuscation category (Elsbach, 2003) that works by maximising the perception of negative outcomes (Bolino et al., 2008).

Third, by introducing 'dramatise' as a new action and validating the three other actions (reveal, conceal and selectively disclose), this study extended the set of transparency actions proposed by Granados, Gupta, and Kauffman (2010). Further, the research also supported the claim that impression management is viable on the Internet (Miller, 1995) and is inherent in e-commerce and online marketing communication activities (Benthaus, Risius & Beck, 2016) and thus extended the context beyond that of face-to-face, offline marketing illustrated by Prus (1989).

In the IS realm, this thesis provided initial supporting evidence of symbolic action within the context of e-commerce. The findings demonstrated that online retailers used information (that is, symbols) in various forms of transparency to communicate with consumers and manage their stores images. The dramaturgical model of impression management by online retail stores supported the notion of symbolic IS research based on the theorizing of information as a symbol that mediated an organisation's actions.

The findings of this study contributed to practice by providing an inventory of tactics and actions from which small retailers and marketing practitioners could exploit to enhance or reposition their online store image. The study proposed nine impression management tactics, six information tactics, and four strategic actions, which supported four retail store images. Consistent with the marketing and IS literature, the findings of the study suggested that retailers promote persuasive images of store reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness in an attempt to convert visitors into buyers. Under-resourced e-businesses could select a focal store image from among the three images and concentrate their impression marketing efforts on a single image. Of the three images, trustworthiness was the most important component for online merchants, particularly for nascent new entrants in the e-market space. Retailers could consider signalling trust on their websites, for example, through a clear communication of strong commitment to protect consumer privacy and to fulfil customer orders. In short, this study suggested simple and easily implementable strategies on retail websites to enhance store images of reputable, legitimate, trustworthiness and retailer assertiveness.

1.6 Delimitation of Scope

The scope of this study was defined by three contextual considerations. First, the study was situated in the online retail context. Selecting the B2C sector of the retail industry, as opposed to the business-to-business or consumer-to-consumer sectors, focused the research on firm-consumer interactions, and centred on the strategies and tactics used by the firm in a computer-mediated environment (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014).

A second context that set the boundaries of this study is small business, defined in this study as a firm with less than twenty employees (Burgess, 2009). Small businesses are typically characterised as under-resourced due to the low level of ownership of physical, human and organisational capital resources (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015; Ghobakhloo, Hong, Sabouri, & Zulkifli, 2012; Parker & Castleman, 2007). Leading e-commerce companies such as Amazon and Taobao had been well researched while small e-businesses received relatively less scholastic attention. Small firms faced more challenges to create the right image (Clow & Baack, 2010) and to survive compared with large firms (Winter, Gaglio, & Rajagopalan, 2009). Researchers have pointed out that it is the small businesses that will influence the future trajectory of e-commerce (Hortaçsu & Syverson, 2015).

Third, Singapore was selected as the geographical context of this study due to her vibrant e-commerce market and as the gateway to other Southeast Asian countries (Kearney, 2015). Three factors accounted for Singapore's status of being the most established e-commerce marketplace in Southeast Asia, namely, matured infrastructure, 'shopaholic' consumers and a conducive business environment. Singapore has one of the highest Internet, mobile phone and social media penetration rate[1] (Kemp, 2014), fast connection speed and mature online payment infrastructure in the region (Teo & Chan, 2015). The consumer base in Singapore is typically young[2], computer literate, affluent[3] (Mediabuzz, 2011) and shop frequently[4] (Visa, 2014). Big players such as Taobao, Gmarket and Groupon were attracted by Singapore's conducive business environment and have established their presence in the city-state.

In short, the context of the study was delimited to the small e-businesses operating as online retailers in Singapore.

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[1] Singapore has 59% social media penetration rate as compared to the global average of 26%, according to a report by We Are Social (Kemp, 2014).

[2] Below 35 years old (Mediabuzz, 2011)

[3] Middle-to-upper income earners (Mediabuzz, 2011)

[4] 58% shopped at least once a month (Visa, 2014)

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the primary theoretical frameworks that underpins the research, namely dramaturgy and impression management, as well as their parent theories – Shannon and Weaver's (1949) seminal work on information theory and symbolic interactionism pioneered by Blumer (1986). While dramaturgy is developed primarily for face-to-face interactions, the chapter supplements the hyperpersonal model of computer-mediated communication (Walther, 1993, 1996) as the secondary theoretical lens used in this thesis.

Chapter 3 sets the context of the research by describing the three contextual considerations in this study - online retail, small business and Singapore's e-commerce landscape. This chapter then presents the conceptual model informed by the review of multidisciplinary literature in IS, information economics, marketing, communications and sociology. Further, the chapter identifies the gaps arising from the review and formulates a central research question to guide the inquiry.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology used for the research and sets out the sampling design, data collection and analysis techniques. The chapter provides the philosophical assumptions embedded in the researcher's worldviews, justifications for a qualitative approach and case study methodology. The rationale for sampling, case and participants selection is then explained. The study relies on two primary sources of data, semi-structured interviews and website content, to derive findings. These findings are then corroborated with a secondary source of data from interviews with consumers. The methods of analysis include open, axial and selective coding procedures for the interview data and content analysis for the website data.

Chapter 5 details the findings on information tactics, impression management tactics and store images while chapter 6 discusses the findings with respect to the existing bodies of literature. The dramaturgical model illustrates how retailers apply strategic actions to web information elements, packages them into information tactics and frames into impression management tactics at the 'backstage'. At the front stage, store images are portrayed resulting from the deployment of impression management tactics. A web façade is presented at the storefront suggesting it is either an impressionist or minimalist character.

Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising the research outcomes and highlighting the study's contributions to research and practice. The chapter states the limitations faced by this study and offers recommendations for future research that may overcome the limitations.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters that sets the stage for advancing the key arguments in the thesis, that is, IM serves to help organisations in managing their corporate images on websites to achieve marketing objectives. The chapter reviews the literature on theoretical frameworks associated with IM that informs this research. Upon establishing the relevant theoretical underpinnings for the thesis, chapter 3 examines the marketing, retail and online contexts in which the IM framework is applied.

Chapter 2 begins with a brief overview of the early formative theories, including information theory and symbolic interactionalism, leading to the development of dramaturgy and the IM framework. The review of the IM literature is structured along two dimensions – level of analysis and communication media. Two levels of analysis, self-presentation by individuals and IM by organisations, explicate the reasons and tactics individuals and organisations manage impressions. The communication media by which impressions are managed extends to include both face-to-face and computer-mediated channels. As the theoretical frameworks were developed prior to the Internet era, this chapter gives due consideration to the difference between online and offline interactions by reviewing studies that investigated IM on corporate websites, blogs and social media.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a deeper understanding of the way IM functions, especially the factors that drive its use, the process in which it is carried out, the situations under which it is activated, and the tactics available for organisations to exploit. Meaning, the 'building blocks' of the IM framework is laid out in this chapter. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the importance of information control in fostering impressions and elicits the way information can be strategically managed through the account of a few empirical studies.

2.2 Theoretical Foundations of Impression Management

Contemporary study of IM is inspired by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, which is in turn influenced by symbolic interactionism. Within communication theories, the theory of symbolic interactionism is based on the premise that people behave according to the meanings they assign to events, objects, and other people in their interactions (Blumer, 1986). Theories of communication are closely associated with the development of information theory in the

1940s by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. In the next sections, I trace the history and the evolution on the development of IM, beginning with a brief mention of the origins of information theory. Figure 2 shows the parent theories of IM discussed in this Chapter.

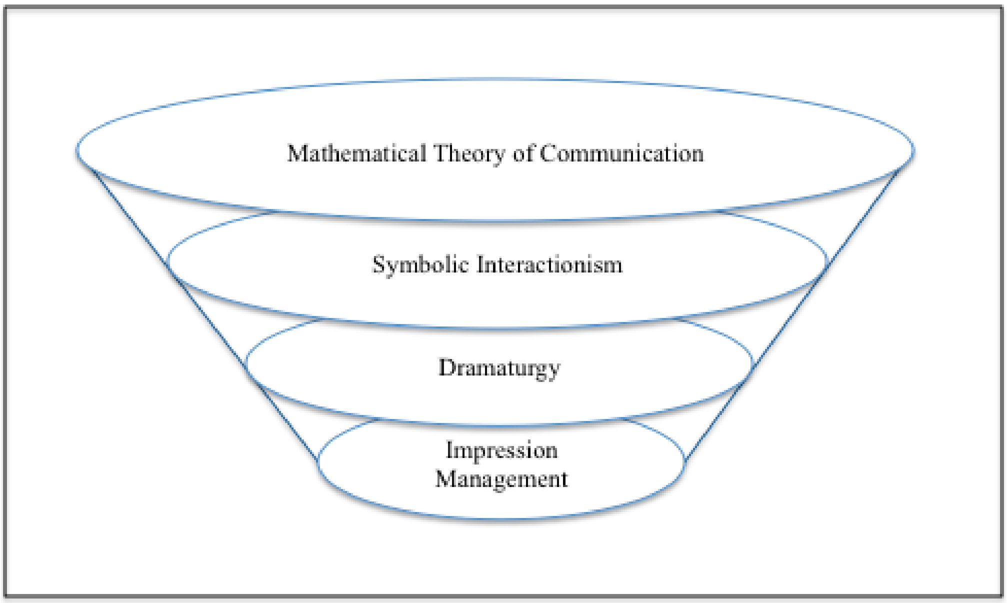

Figure 2: Parent theories of Impression Management

2.2.1 Mathematical Theory of Communication

The origin of theories that explains human communication can be traced back to Claude Shannon's (1948) landmark paper on the mathematical theory of communication, or more commonly known as 'information theory'. Lauded as the father of the Digital Age, albeit an unintentional one, he single-handedly refined the concept of information and in doing so, incidentally produced the blueprint that underlies the digital revolution and the beginning of the information era. In his renowned paper, Shannon (1948) demonstrated that information can be encoded in binary digits or bits, and can be transmitted with minimal error. His conceptual proposal to digitise messages had overcome historical communication problems that were often plagued by noise. This remarkable breakthrough enables the subsequent development of modes of communication including telephone signals, radio waves, text, pictures and the Internet. That single publication of Shannon's (1948) in the *Bell System Technical Journal* has spawned an entire science of information theory that we came to know of today.

Shannon's (1948) influential ideas were however, fundamentally advocating a signal transmission theory intended for the engineering audience, although not specifically a communication theory. His theory describes the data transmission process within a communication environment that constitutes the source, transmitter, receiver, destination, message, signal, noise and channel (Figure 3). Weaver (1949), however saw the application of Shannon's theory beyond its engineering predispositions. Describing the use of the word 'communication' in a broad context, he positioned Shannon's theory to embrace all forms of human communication (Ritchie, 1986).

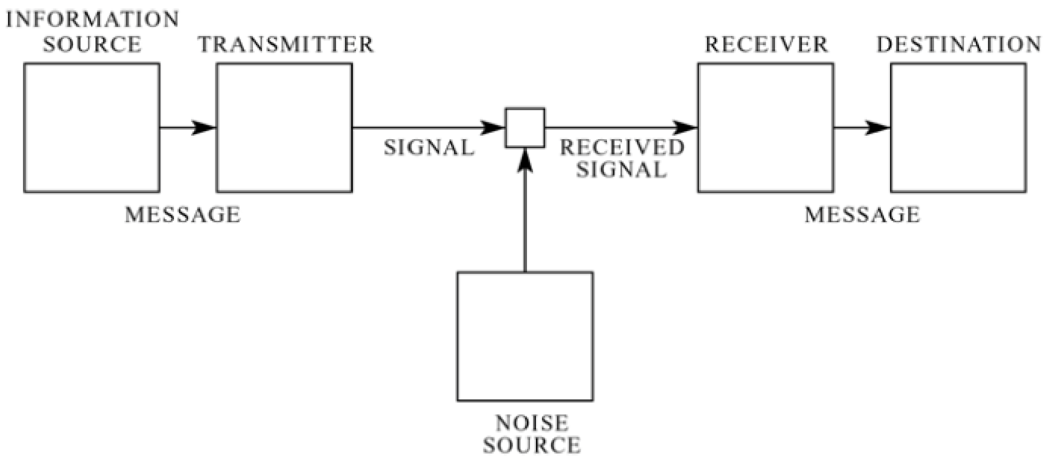

Figure 3: Claude Shannon (1948, p.381)'s data transmission model

Shannon and Weaver's (1949) information theory acknowledged the occurrence of the communication problem at three different levels – technical, semantic and effectiveness. At the technical level, the communication problem is concerned with transmitting the symbols of communication accurately. The semantic level focuses on the precise transmission to convey the intended meaning, while the impact of the received message on the recipient's conduct is a problem concerning the effectiveness level. Vital to this study is the research that addresses problems at the semantic level. While Shannon and Weaver's process model addresses the mathematical aspects of data transmission between the sender and recipient, semiotic models take into account human behavioural aspects that are expressed through the meaning of the message. Complementary to their technical approach are subsequent theories that extended our understanding on communication with further development on cognition, perception and attribution of meaning to messages (Stewart, Malayan & Roberts, 2001). Symbolic interaction theory is one such approach that studies human communication based upon interactions and meanings. The next section describes the theoretical underpinnings of symbolic interactionism.

2.2.2 Symbolic Interactionism

Pioneering the work on using symbols as a means of thinking and communication (Ashworth, 2000), the American philosopher, George Herbert Mead (1863-1931), laid the groundwork for the subsequent development of the theory by his student and colleague, Herbert Blumer. As a social pragmatist, he argued that linguistic symbols form a system of shared meanings between people and exist as part of their interactions (Ashworth, 2000). Mead further advocated the use of a symbol system, primarily language, to develop the mind. In his posthumously published book "*Mind, Self and Society*" (Mead, 1934), Mead regarded the use of language as constituting the process of mind, that is, the ability of the mind to enter into an activity, in this case, communication. "Mind arises through communication .. not communication through mind," he professed (Mead, 1934, p. 50).

Drawing on Mead's theoretical work, Blumer (1986) created and defined the term "symbolic interaction". The central theme of symbolic interactionism lies with the use of culturally derived symbols with shared meanings to interact and communicate. Reality of the self, mind, and society, ultimately emerges from the social constructions and interpretations accomplished through symbolic language. The ontological perspective of Blumer's (1986) symbolic interactionism is that society is comprised of human beings who are acting organisms, and hence collectively the society exists in action. The defining characteristic of social interaction in human groups is individuals who acted upon the consideration of the actions of others. Symbolic interactionism is grounded on three core principles established by Blumer (1986). First, the attitudes of people towards other humans and things are based on the meanings that are interpreted from them. Second, these meanings are inferred from the social interactions between people. Third, the interpretation of meanings occurs as an ongoing interpretive process, during which the meanings may change.

In addition, three basic premises augment Blumer (1986)'s perspective, that is, meaning, language and thinking. Meaning is an integral part of the symbolic interaction theoretical framework. The importance of meaning rests on the idea that objects by themselves do not carry any intrinsic meaning, but meaning is assigned to them by means of human interactions. Humans engaged in organized interactions and as a result, form meanings from their experiences. Symbols are given meaning and are used in language by people to communicate effectively with one another. Language, therefore, provides the means by which a consensus of the object's meanings can be reached. It is also the use of symbols that distinguishes the communication between humans and that of animals. Symbols are consequently indispensable elements that formed the basis of human communication. Communication involves thinking, and thinking can change a person's interpretation of various symbols (Aksan, Kısac, Aydın, & Demirbuken, 2009).

Attempts to understand human behaviour are futile without a prior sound understanding of the meaning of things, argued Aksan et al. (2009). The interpretation of symbolic meanings and actions are intricately related. Blumer's (1986) assertion of "the meaning of things directs action" (O'Shaughnessy, 1992) shares the same perspective as the German sociologist and economist Max Weber (1864-1920). In fact, the root of symbolic interaction theory is sometimes attributed to Weber. In Weber's (2002) book, *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, he illustrated how work was historically framed by a Protestant worldview and a set of moral values as a calling from God. Dedication to work is therefore considered morally meaningful. The acts of work commitment follow this widely accepted meaning of work. Weber's approach to theorizing the social world is based on the idea that, as individuals, our actions are influenced by the meanings we construe and our interpretations of the world around us.

While this thesis follows Blumer's (1986) line of thought, it is worthy to note that contemporary symbolic interactionism is divided into two schools. The "Chicago School" is associated with Blumer's interpretation of the ever-changing and fluid nature of the social world and emphasised the study of self-concept as a process using qualitative methodologies. In contrast, Kuhn (1964) focused on structure and advocated stability of the self-concept and its analysis using quantitative methods. Positivistic oriented, Kuhn (1964) belongs to the "Iowa School".

2.3 Dramaturgy

Goffman's (1959) work on dramaturgy is influenced by symbolic interactionism (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). Quoting from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*, he built his conceptual framework on the analogy that the world is a stage, and the people are players or performers, who can enter or exit the stage, and each playing one or multiple roles (Goffman, 1959). An actor enters 'the stage' when he first come into the presence of other people during a face-to-face interaction. According to Goffman (1959), social interactions resemble performances.

Performance is “the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959, p. 26).

Another concept in dramaturgy is the front region, that is, the ‘stage’ where actors deliver their performances. Found within the front region is the setting, which refers to the equipment or tools that are fixed at the place of performance and are used by the actors for their expressions. Furniture, décor, layout and stage props are examples of settings. During the performance, the actor may intentionally or unintentionally put on a personal front. To the audience, this personal front is made up of stimuli that inform the actors’ appearances and mannerisms. Their appearances signify a temporary ritual state of the actors and may divulge the activity they are engaged in, be it formal work or social recreation. Their mannerisms speak of the interaction role they assume. For example, a leader typically takes on a more aggressive mannerism than a follower who appears generally meeker by comparison. To be seen as a certain kind of person requires the possession of the related characteristics as well as the sustainability of conduct through the portrayal of the personal front. The projection of the associated personal front necessitates consistency in appearance and mannerism. Similarly, coherence can be expected among the setting, appearance and mannerism for a convincing performance.

Contrary to the front-stage performance is the back-stage, where actors stopped performing and behaved out of character. A transition from the front to the back regions typically leads to a change in the actor’s performance. The path from the front to back regions is normally hidden from view. Sometimes the entire back region is out of bounds to the audience. The line that divides the front and back regions are usually evident, such as in department stores, where the front region displays the merchandise and the back region is the storeroom. Regions tend to function interchangeably between the front and back at different periods of time.

2.3.1 Self-Presentation

To Goffman (1959), two streams of communication are evident as individuals interacts with others - one is the expressions they *give* and the other is the expressions they *give off*. The expressions *given* involve the spoken language of ‘verbal symbols’ that is used to convey information to their listeners. It is the expression *given off*, the symptomatic actions, which includes non-verbal cues and is often unintentional, that illustrates the theatrical effect. Actors are in control of the expressions they *give* but are blinded to the expressions they *give off*. The expressions g*iven off* by actors are difficult for them to manipulate at will. The audience is thus able to observe the expressions *given off* and check against the validity of the expressions *given*. Goffman described this as "a fundamental asymmetry" in the communication process (1959, p. 18). That is, while the actors are only aware of the communication process in which they *give*, the audience observes both what they *give* and *give off*. It does not, however, take long before the actors are aware of this asymmetry and attempt to reinstate the balance. They may even exploit it to their advantage. Knowing that they are being observed, the actors control their behaviour and deliberately maintain their expressions by ensuring that they project a consistent image until they exit 'the stage'. The actors' motive to impress the other may vary, but ultimately their aim is to control the behaviour of the other person towards them. They achieve this by presenting their desired image of themselves that will lead to the other person to act in accordance to the way them preferred. Goffman called this self-presentation.

2.3.2 Strategic Control of Information

The control and regulation of information flow during the process of managing impressions is one of the central tenets of dramaturgy. Goffman's (1959) treatment of impression as information provides the basis for this argument. In explaining dramaturgy, Goffman (1959) treated impression as information that provides the unobvious facts to the audience, and expression as the communication process during social interactions. To manage impressions means to control the information flows to the target by way of packaging information such that it is fit for the consumption by the intended audience. Spontaneous and uninhibited expression of all and any information is uncharacteristic of effective communication. According to Schlenker and Pontari (2000), an effective communicator would carefully consider his audience's perspective, predict their probable interpretations and reactions to his messages, and tailor the information in a way the leads to his desired impact.

Strategic information control may involve over-communication of some information and under-communication of others. Goffman (1959) explained that an actor could sustain his image by controlling information availability according to his role function and his regions of access. An actor could be a performer who is an insider possessing all information about the performance, including destructive information. He has access to both the front and back regions. An audience is only able to observe and deduce any other information on their own. The audience are generally not aware of destructive information. Outsiders have no information made available to them at all. While the audience is limited to the 'front region' only while outsiders have access to none. Therefore, managing impressions involve expressing selective information that is restricted to specific audiences. Taken together, a dramaturgical view of social interactions involves an individual expressing selective information to specific audiences to impress or to sustain others' impression of him.

Strategic disclosure and selective concealment are two ways of manipulating information content. Goffman (1959) suggests people play "information game(s)" by engaging in "a potential infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation and rediscovery" (p. 8). Through a combination of information regulation, content manipulation and audience segregation (Goffman, 1959), organisations and individuals alike are able to manage the impressions others formed of themselves in a manner they desire.

2.3.3 Dramatisation, Concealment and Audience Segregation

Dramatisation, concealment and audience segregation are self-presentation techniques that individuals employ. Dramatisation amplifies information while concealment works in the opposite way to hide details. Dramatisation involves the magnification of specific aspects of an activity for it to become significant in the eyes of others, which may otherwise remain unknown. For example, merchants tend to charge higher prices than expected for products that appear inexpensive, so as to cover expenses that are not visible to the customers, such as insurance, slack period and others. Through the use of expressive signs, the individual may dramatically highlight and draw others' attention to confirmatory facts that he wished to convey. Performing arts and uniformed professions such as violinists, policemen, and surgeons are examples of jobs that exhibit dramatisations of work.

Concealment appears necessary when certain information or actor's actions are inconsistent with the ideal values endorsed by the wider society. Goffman (1959, p. 44) contended that "a performance presents an idealized view of the situation". Given that an actor would naturally seek to present the best possible image to his audience, his performance therefore portrays this notion of idealization. The delivery of idealized performances may require concealment of a few types: (i) activities in which the actor makes economic gains or indulges in secretive pleasures but ideally should not be exposed to others; (ii) tell-tale signs of corrections on errors and mistakes so as to preserve a sense of infallibility; (iii) amount of effort spent to produce a finished product, be it massive or minimal; and (iv) evidence of the involvement of 'dirty work' which may be generally work that is physically unclean, morally degrading or partially legal.

Besides dramatisation and concealment, audience segregation is another technique available for the actor to create the desired impressions to his audience. The actor skilfully ensures that the audience who observes one of his earlier plays, will not the same people observing him play a different part in another setting. No matter how well impressions are fostered, interruptions may occur that threaten to destroy the intended plan of the actor. In the event of failure in audience segregation due to interruptions, two accommodative techniques might be used. The actor may choose an abrupt shift to another act appropriate for the intruder to observe, or to allow and welcome the intruder to join in while carrying on the same show. For example, a married couple engaged in a heated argument may temporarily stopped their quarrel when an unsuspecting neighbour appeared, or they may continue to be embroiled in their verbal fight, thus ignoring the third party.

Table 1 summarises the recent studies that employed dramaturgy theory as the theoretical framework.

Table 1: Recent studies using dramaturgical theory

Source	Context of research	Relevant findings	Implications to this study
Lalonde, Gilbert, Magala, and Magala (2016)	Organisational dramaturgy in the field of management consulting	Management consultants use rhetoric and rituals to obtain the desired cooperation from clients	Rhetoric and rituals are tools for impression management
Corrigan and Beaubien (2013)	Negotiating organisation mergers on the Internet	Dramatic actions taken by merger organisations include setting the stage, arrival at the theatre, scripting, framing, managing the audience, staging and performance	Internet and social media provide the virtual stage for organisations to engage their public stakeholders
Da Cunha (2013)	Presentation of work performance in organisations	Managers idealised achievements and suppressed threatening information to impress their leaders	Supports the notion that people use information systems to manipulate information to impress others
McCarthy, Pitt, and Berthon (2011)	Customisation in service marketing	Service customisation can be achieved through the use of dramaturgy concepts – scripts (through the design of the service encounter) and improvisation (through training and delivery capabilities)	Provides empirical support in the use of scripts and improvisation in a marketing context
Yusuf (2011)	Persuading investors of new venture's legitimacy	Entrepreneurs can use four impression management techniques to persuade investors: framing, scripting, staging and performing	Image-building tactics of framing, scripting, staging and performing communicate the firm's credibility and legitimacy
O'Brien, Payne, Nolan, and Ingleton (2010)	Evaluation of service delivery by social service agents	Service providers use knowledge selectively to frame how information is revealed so as to present their work favourably to the evaluators	Suggests that people only reveal information that is perceived to be politically acceptable

Source	Context of research	Relevant findings	Implications to this study
Halliday, Davies, Ward, and Lim (2008)	Charismatic leadership of lecturers in higher education	Students' perception of a charismatic lecturer is based on trust (e.g. being reliable, commands respect) and identification (e.g. instils a sense of purpose, acts as role model)	Trust and identity are important components of a charismatic image
Mumford and Gray (2007)	Organisational communication of a new risky technology to the public	The organisation uses tactics such as symbolic acts, framing and scripting, and adopts an appropriate front (which is sympathetic to community concerns) while the opposing residents uses imagery to dramatise potential risks	Adopts fronts that match the setting in which the organisation is in
Moisio and Arnould (2005)	The shaping of consumer shopping experiences through marketing	A dramaturgical framework of consumer shopping experiences includes drama structure (e.g. setting, actors, audience, performance), drama interaction (e.g. active consumer participation) and drama content (e.g. cultural experiences)	Relates dramaturgical concepts to a retail context
Panteli and Duncan (2004)	Development of trust between temporary virtual team members	An interplay of interactions enabled the development of trust through scripting: formally scripted, pre-scripted, co-scripted, re-scripted, unscripted	Scripts facilitate trust building in a virtual environment

2.4 Primary Theory: Impression Management (IM)

The previous section traced the inspiration for the contemporary study of IM back to its origin via Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory. Building on its dramaturgical roots, the field of IM has received considerable scholarly attention over the past six decades. While early studies of IM focused on the individual, subsequent research was shifted to the workplace and revolved around the tactics used by people in organisational settings, for example, job selection process, performance appraisal, organisational citizenship behaviour, leadership and management. IM in the workplace remains a popular stream of research with a substantial body of literature, and is still growing today. Similar to how people harbour a deep desire to impress, so do organisations. Replacing people with organisations as social actors, the study of organisation IM or OIM is primarily concerned with influencing others' impression of the organisation as a whole (Bolino et al., 2008).

2.4.1 Definitions

Existing literature focusing on IM contains a variety of definitions with sufficient consistency to make the scholarly study of IM viable (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). IM definitions explain *what* it is, *why* it is used and *whom* it is used on. To the question: "*What* is IM?" scholars defined IM as a process (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld et al., 1995), a behaviour (Bolino & Turnley, 2003; D. J. Schneider, 1981), an activity (Bass, 1990; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000), a systematic attempt (Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osburn, 2004) and strategic communications (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997). The purpose of IM (that is, *why* is it used), was to control impressions and images (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980) or information (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000), and to create, influence, protect and maintain the desired impression or perception (Bass, 1990; Bolino & Turnley, 2003; Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Schermerhorn et al., 2004). A commonality among the wide-ranging definitions is the reference to others as to *whom* IM is used on. In alignment with the 'information' theme of this thesis, a relevant definition of IM adopted is: the process where information and/or actions are controlled and regulated to shape the perception of other people of oneself (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Mohamed, Gardner, & Paolillo, 1999). Control and regulation in this sense carries the notion of managing, shaping or adjusting impressions (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Synthesizing and extending the definitions to the organisation as an entity, OIM refers to any action designed and carried out to strategically communicate and influence the way the target audience perceives the organisation as a whole (Bolino et al., 2008; Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Elsbach et al., 1998). This definition is grounded in individual IM and empirical studies on OIM (Elsbach, 2003).

It is important to distinguish between IM and self-presentation because the personal IM literature has the tendency to use the two terms interchangeably (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As noted by Leary and Kowalski (1990), IM is a broader concept that encompasses impressions created for self and for entities, such as organisations and businesses, whereas self-presentation is reserved for impressions relevant only to the individual self (Schlenker, 1980). The key differences are apparent in the way presentations are operationalized. Organisations are more attentive towards signalling their legitimacy and using accounts to demonstrate their alignment to industry norms while individuals are more concerned about their distinctive character and adherence to social norms (Elsbach, 2003).

Another distinction between OIM and 'IM in the workplace' needs to be made here. IM in the workplace is often referred to as IM *in* organisations, and is distinctly different from IM *by* organisations (or OIM). OIM differs from IM in the workplace in that the actor in OIM is an organisation entity whereas the actor in the workplace setting is an individual, typically an employee, and sometimes the organisation leader. The focus of this research is on OIM, that is, the presentation of the organisation to its stakeholders, primarily existing and potential customers. Throughout the thesis, the term 'actor' is used to refer to organisational representatives (in the OIM context) that displays IM behaviours while 'target' refers to the people at whom these behaviours are intended (Bolino et al., 2008).

A similar term used in organisational studies is 'organisational perception management', which refers to the "actions that are designed and carried out by organisational spokespersons to influence audiences' perceptions of the organisation" (Elsbach, 2003). Perceptions of the organisation are formed from organisational images, reputation and identities (Elsbach, 2003). The organisation image, in particular the intended image, is the perception that the organisation want external audiences to hold about it (Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006). Reputation, in contrast, refers to the "mental associations ... actually held by others" while identity relates to those "held by internal organisation" (Brown et al., 2006, p. 102). On top of the IM strategies that are typically focused on the organisation's image and reputation presented to external stakeholders, perception management encompasses internally-focused corporate identity management strategies. This thesis is centred on intended image of the firm, and does not include reputation and corporate identity. Nevertheless, the externally-focused strategies of perception management are relevant to this study. Throughout this thesis, the term ‘impression management’ is used with respect to the organisation as an entity.

2.4.2 Organisation Impression Management (OIM)

Why do organisations manage impressions? Research suggests that organisations strived to enhance, maintain, protect or repair their corporate images so as to achieve or retain competitive advantage critical to their survival (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). For example, companies use IM to respond to threats of survival during a crisis (O’Connell, De Lange, Stoner, & Sangster, 2016), to attenuate negative effects of wrongdoing (Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012), as a distraction to stakeholders during succession announcements of a new CEO (Graffin, Carpenter, & Boivie, 2011), to avert anticipated challenges (Elsbach et al., 1998), to enhance corporate legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994), to minimise damages to corporate image (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 1993), to increase acceptance of controversial practices (Elsbach & Sutton, 1992), and to garner support from important stakeholders (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This chapter focuses on two main themes: IM can be driven by (a) the motivation to achieve organisational goals and (b) situations that called for specific organisational responses. The next sections illustrate the IM behaviours that are driven by motivation and situation.

2.4.2.1. Motivation-Driven OIM

Individuals and organisations alike are interested to maximise good perceptions of others towards them and to minimise the projection of bad images (Bolino et al., 2008). A key strategic motivation to manage impressions is the propensity to establish influencing power over the target audience. Ingratiation, self-promotion, exemplification, intimidation and supplication are strategies that yield immediate outcomes.

In sociology literature on personal IM, ingratiation is the behaviour exhibited by an individual who attempts to convince others of his social attractiveness. Further, the actor could choose to use one of four ingratiation strategies; namely, self-enhancement, other-enhancement, opinion conformity and doing favours for the target. Self-enhancement is a self-referent about the likeable traits or characteristics of an actor. Other-enhancement involves highlighting the positive qualities of the target, for example through flattery, and in turn induces the target to reciprocate by liking the actor. Opinion conformity is a tactic exhibited through imitation.

Being similar to each other is one way to increase another's attraction toward oneself. Doing a favour for the target is yet another means of ingratiating oneself with the target.

Besides ingratiation, self-promotion seeks to fulfil an immediate goal by demonstrating competence, knowledge or intelligence in a specific area such as sports. Exemplification is useful for an actor who wished to be seen as morally respectable and admirable. A parent, for example may act as a role model in front of his child. Intimidation involves the use of threats on the part of a powerful actor on their target so as to yield compliance to the actor's demands. Conversely, a socially dependent actor would typically use supplication to solicit help from a more powerful target.

The underlying reasons for individuals to manage impressions as suggested in the existing sociological bodies of literature on personal IM also shed light on similar motivations for organisations. Motivation-driven strategies are employed by both organisations and individuals to capitalise on opportunities to impress others. When deployed for company websites, forums and blogs, these strategies (with the exception of exemplification) were found to result in positive improvement of the company's financial performance (Schniederjans, Cao, & Schniederjans, 2013).

A second way to establish social influence is through the projection of identities associated with power (Tedeschi, 1981). Possessing social power would enable the actor to enjoy higher chances of success at influencing others. Studies found that individuals are able to exploit reputational characteristics of their social identities, such as expertise, trustworthiness, legitimate authority, attractiveness, credibility, and prestige, to influence others during subsequent interactions. Strategies that leverage reputable identities bear a long-lasting effect and can be activated by the actor in future interactions, as opposed to strategies of ingratiation, self-promotion exemplification, intimidation and supplication which yields short-term outcomes. Organisations frequently use visible actions to manage perceptions through the signalling of reputation that demonstrates high quality, distinctive competencies or product niches (Elsbach, 2003). Some common examples include affiliation with distinguished organisations (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996) or disassociation with less desirable groups (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). The affiliation could be declared either formally or informally (Elsbach, 2003).

2.4.2.2. Situation-Driven OIM

Given a situation with positive consequences, organisations could potentially utilise personal IM strategies rooted in sociology to enhance their corporate image. Drawing from accounts perspective, Tedeschi and Riess (1981) analysed the self-presentation tactics of individuals that is focused on the actor's responsibility and the consequences of the event. Responsibility refers to the degree an individual is accountable for their actions and their outcomes. The more responsibility one holds, the greater their accountability for the outcomes and consequences. As for consequences, the greater its impact, the more self-presentation is exhibited by the actor. When the perceived consequences of an action is positive, that is, in an image-enhancing situation, actors will prefer to gain responsibility by using entitling and increase the positivity of the consequences by using enhancements. This behaviour is, in turn, approved or rewarded by the target and count as credits towards the relationship. Entitling is a strategy used by actors who were not held responsible for the action that they thinks deserves credit, and which ultimately results in positive consequences (Tedeschi, 1981). Essentially, entitling is an exact opposite of excuses, and it is when actors attempt to create a favourable social identity in front of others. Whereas under the situation that actors believe less credit was given to the positive consequences of their actions than it ought to be, enhancement is the strategy that can be used by actors to augment the merit of their actions and its consequences so as to reach a higher level of attainment than before. Enhancement is the opposite of justification, and can be used when actors attempt to increase the favourability of the positive consequences of their actions. Finally, both entitling and enhancement strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They can be used simultaneously to gain recognition for responsibility of actions and to increase favourable perception of actions.

On the other hand, threatening situations could be mitigated via two broad classifications of situation-driven IM strategies, namely remedial and anticipatory tactics. Remedial tactics are primarily concerned with damage control after the occurrence of a controversial event that leads to negative public reactions, such as hazardous accidents (Holladay, 2009), fraud (Caldiero, Taylor, & Ungureanu, 2009), and bankruptcies (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). While remedial tactics are reactive, anticipatory tactics are proactive in communicating corporate images before any threatening situations arise (Hargis & Watt, 2010). Both types of situation-driven tactics share a common purpose of justifying a negatively perceived incident through a variety of public avenues such as media releases, annual reports and advertising (Tyler, Connaughton, Desrayaud, & Fedesco, 2012).

2.4.2.3. Remedial IM Tactics

Remedial IM tactics are tailored communications or actions that specifically respond to events threatening an organisation's image (Elsbach et al., 1998; Schlenker, 1980). Studies on remedial tactics suggest that they are commonly used to repair corporate images after a widely perceived negative public event (Tyler et al., 2012), to restore legitimacy and/or convey competence (Sutton & Callahan, 1987).

Forms of accounts

Organisational remedial tactics can be deployed through two forms of remedial accounts, denials and acknowledgements (Elsbach, 1994). Denials attempt to suggest non-involvement or non-occurrence of a controversial incident, as shown in statements such as 'there is no evidence' and 'we do not have a problem'. Similarly, in the context of personal IM, individuals gave excuses to minimise their responsibility in a negative situation. When giving an excuse, actors inadvertently admit their actions are inappropriate but attempts to distance themselves from the actions by denying responsibility for them (Tedeschi, 1981). Excuses can be classified into three denial strategies (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). First, actors may deny of any intention to cause negative consequences if it involves an accident, or if they are not in the capacity to plan in advance. Under such scenarios, actors may offer excuses such as plea of ignorance or failure to foresee consequences on the basis of poor judgment, oversight, lack of information, distraction, misrepresentation by others, and lack of time for careful consideration. Second, actors may claim the lack of bodily control due to physical or psychological causes, such physical or mental illness, under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and emotional stress. Third, actors may withdraw from agency and commission by denying being the agent of action, or claiming a case of mistaken identity or that they were not given the authority to decide otherwise (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981).

In contrast, acknowledgements indicated recognition of the organisation's responsibility but were accompanied by claims of having good reasons for the actions taken. The two conditions under which acknowledgements are offered are, firstly, when the consequences are minor and less severe, and secondly, when organisations are obviously involved such that denials are impossible. For example, image-repair tactics were deployed as correction action statements in news coverage on fraud (Caldiero et al., 2009). Posting news releases on its corporate website allows the organisation in question to frame the crisis to its advantage. Other popular image-repair tactics used in the context of fraud include shifting the blame, bolstering, good intentions and transcendence. In conjunction with reputation repair tactics, organisations also use information-giving strategies by providing instructions that advise affected people, and adjusting information that helps these people cope with the psychological stress resulting from the crisis (Holladay, 2009).

Organisational acknowledgements are similar to justifications used by individuals. Actors who use justifications admit personal responsibility for their actions but do not see the consequences as negative or wrong. Actors frequently use a combination of various types of justifications that indicate conformity to social norms, to uphold their reputations and to enhance self-fulfilment (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981). Justification that involves realignment of actions to socially acceptable norm and rules includes appeals to higher authority, appeals to ideology, appeals to humanistic values, self-defence, and standards of justice and norms of loyalty. Reputational justification is a second classification that includes the protection of self from coercion, the protection of man- or womanhood, and the maintenance of credibility.

Contents of accounts

Other than forms of accounts, remedial tactics can be executed via two types of account contents, that is, references to institutional practices and technical explanations (Elsbach, 1994). Endorsed institutional practices signalled broad acceptance within the specific industry and society as a whole. References to these established institutional procedures and structures might therefore help the organisation support their claims. Technical explanations are used to support accounts by signalling the effectiveness and efficiency of an organisation's performance. Organisation accounts often include references to industry trends or norms to justify organisations' behaviour (Elsbach, 2003). To escape from predicaments, the tendency is for organisations to explain their behaviour was normal under the specific circumstances. In comparison with an individual's self-presentation, the use of IM tactics helps to realign doubtful behaviour into acceptable social norms governing the specific situation (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). When an individual appears not to fit his social role or status, IM functions in a way to assist him to shift back into that role (Tedeschi, 1981). Similarly, organisations engage in perception management to influence its stakeholders into believing that its actions are aligned to industry norms.

Unlike institutional practices, technical arguments are directed at informed or affiliated parties, due to the technical characteristics of the content. In an empirical study of organisational legitimacy during controversial events threatening the cattle industry in California (U.S.), the most effective accounts were a combination of acknowledgements and references to institutionalized structures (Elsbach, 1994). Acknowledgements demonstrate a sense of sincerity while references to institutional characteristics provide adequate support for accounts to be believable.

Symbolic actions

In organisation literature, OIM is associated with symbolic management (Zott & Huy, 2007) and perception management (Elsbach, 2003). Symbolic management is about performing symbolic actions (Zott & Huy, 2007), which include “any activities by organisational spokesperson that are used, at least in part, to affect audience perceptions of the organisation” (Elsbach, 2003, p. 306). These symbolic actions include both routine and special actions that result in a salient and observable impact on the public image of the organisation (Elsbach, 2003). Ceremonial action is a type of symbolic action that emphasises an organisation’s positive character traits, and is aimed at correcting negative impressions after a company’s wrongdoing (Zavyalova et al., 2012). Being highly visible, ceremonial actions attempt to deflect attention away from the act of wrongdoing and its causes while redirecting stakeholders’ attention to the organisation’s behaviour that is congruent with social expectations. Researchers have, however, noted that IM is not purely symbolic (Carberry & King, 2012) and may involve both symbolic and practical aspects (Zavyalova et al., 2012).

Remedial tactics may take the form of symbolic actions, particularly as technical and ceremonial actions (Zavyalova et al., 2012). Technical actions directly address the cause of the organisation’s wrongdoing, for example compensation offers to customers after product recall. Ceremonial actions emphasise the positive traits of the organisation and in doing so, deflect the public’s attention away from the wrongdoing. Through re-categorisation, organisations could potentially correct the initial unfavourable impression. The effectiveness of technical actions could be challenged as taking technical actions may reinforce negative impressions. Similarly, an organisation’s ceremonial actions may run the risk of being interpreted by its stakeholders as self-serving.

Predictably, organisations do not rely on a single strategy all the time but instead vary their strategies for different situations. When faced with increasing stakeholders' pressures, the IM stances of organisations were found to evolve over time (Van Halderen, Bhatt, Berens, J. Brown, & B. M. van Riel, 2016). Organisations challenged by environmental legitimacy on the subject of climate change did not give in to pressures immediately but gradually over a period of several years. Organisations were found to undergo four phases of change in the use of IM tactics, from advocating (first phase) and sense giving the initial stance (second phase), to repairing image (third phase) and finally adjusting its stance (fourth phase). Substantive actions eventually followed symbolic accounts.

While remedial tactics may appear to be effective in reducing scrutiny of the organisation by its audiences during the occurrence of controversial events, its drawbacks include backfiring as the target audience may view them as insincere and its implementation is costly (Elsbach et al., 1998). Given the drawbacks of remedial tactics, anticipatory or pre-emptive tactics appear more desirable to organisations in avoiding confrontations and subsequent damage control which is often costly.

2.4.2.4. Anticipatory IM Tactics

Anticipatory OIM refers to an organisation's effort to influence audiences' perception of upcoming events by reducing its perceived responsibility of a failure or by limiting the extent of negative perceptions of the organisation (Elsbach et al., 1998). Organisations use anticipatory tactics for dual purposes, that is, to avert initial confrontations and to prevent the escalation of existing challenges. In a qualitative analysis of hospitals' billing practices, Elsbach et al. (1998) identified accommodation and legitimacy tactics for averting initial confrontations with patients. Hospitals in the study were found to present 'accommodating' corporate images by highlighting the favours performed for patients and by displaying self-characterizations as being caring and customer-oriented. Images of legitimacy signalled the hospitals' conformity to institutional norms, such as accounting procedures and technical guidelines. For example, patients' bills provided sufficient information but were not overly detailed to induce queries about the charges. These initial tactics strived to diminish attention to the bills to avoid potential disputes from patients. To prevent initial challenges from escalating, hospitals used intimidation and bureaucratic tactics to distract or divert attention away from the bills. When patients sought clarifications on itemized charges on the bills, intimidating images distracted their attention from the bills as service staff verbalised threats of punishments, which in turn, induced fear and anxiety. Examples of threats of punishments included an inflation of the final hospital bill or a transfer of the case to the debt collector. Images of bureaucracy induced mental pictures of organisational red tape that invoked feelings of frustration and helplessness, which in turn discouraged patients to pursue further course of actions against the hospital. Bureaucratic roadblocks functioned in a way to overwhelm patients' attention to bills, therefore averting their potential challenges to the hospital.

Empirical evidence from tests on Elsbach (1994)'s anticipatory OIM conducted by Tyler et al. (2012) found strong support for the model. Their findings suggested that accommodation tactics increased liking for the organisation while legitimacy tactics increased the target's contentment. Intimidation tactics were found to intensify the target's fear of potential threats thereby reducing the likelihood of heightening initial challenges. Targets who were presented with bureaucratic tactics felt overwhelmed and frustrated to the extent of not wanting to pursue the matter any further.

Other scholars have described at least two other types of anticipatory tactics. One is foreshadowing, in which organizations release vague information prior to strategic moves happening in the near future in an attempt to influence analysts' perceptions (Busenbark, Lange & Certo, 2017). Without revealing valuable internal information that competitors might use against them, foreshadowing offers organizations the opportunity to observe analysts' reactions and react accordingly. Another pre-emptive tactic is strategic noise released during the announcements of leadership succession in a study by Graffin et al. (2011). As the appointment of a new CEO often led to unpredictable reactions from shareholders, organisations create strategic noise by simultaneously releasing other important corporate announcements around the same time of the appointment. Confounding information provides an alternative explanation for negative stock market reactions and therefore distracts investors from associating the succession with a poorer market performance.

A recent study found social IT sourcing organisations employed pre-emptive strategies to manage their company image. These organisations have dual business orientations, for-profit and social enterprise, and each with a different audience (Sandeep, Ravishankar, & Hislop, 2013). The organisations were found to tailor different performances for different segments of their audience using strategic disclosure and social congruence strategies. Strategic disclosure strategy was employed to portray corporate images of competency and legitimacy by selectively downplaying facts that may elicit negative responses from potential clients and investors, such as the employment of lowly skilled and inexperienced labour. Strategic repositioning companies as being socially responsible, organisations concealed their original unappealing label as ‘rural business process outsourcing companies’ through symbolic association with the more established industry. To portray an image of legitimacy, organisations strategically highlighted information to demonstrate structural and processual adherence to industry standards, at the same time diminishing attention to the newness of the business model. Social congruence was another strategy used to highlight the organisation’s commitment and sensitivity to audiences who viewed the organisation as a social enterprise. Through strategic conformance of the organisation’s policies and activities to prevailing social norms of the targeted communities, social IT organisations were able to project images of being a responsible socio-economic change agents. In summary, the study demonstrated how IT sourcing companies were able to balance their paradoxical orientations by strategically managing information to enable the operationalization of corporate images relevant to different audiences.

Table 2 shows a summary of the remedial and anticipatory tactics discussed in this section.

Table 2: Summary of OIM tactics

Category	**Purpose**	**Type of IM Tactic**	**Strategy**
Proactive *(Positive consequences)*	Motivation-driven to enhance organisational identity	Form of accounts	• Entitling • Enhancements
Remedial *(After negative consequences occurred)*	Situation-driven to manage organisational legitimacy	Form of accounts	• Excuses / Denial • Justification / Acknowledgement
		Content of accounts	• Institutional practices • Technical explanations
Anticipatory *(Before negative consequences occurred)*	Situation-driven to avert anticipated challenges and its further escalation	Anticipatory Excuses	• Self-handicapping • Consensus-raising • Idiosyncrasy claims
		Anticipatory Justifications	• Moral justifications • Reframing of standard • Derogation of evaluator
		Anticipatory Obfuscation	• Accommodation • Legitimacy • Intimidation • Bureaucracy

Note: Adapted from Elsbach (1994, 2003); Elsbach et al. (1998)

2.4.2.5. Typology of IM Tactics

Research on IM has produced a few typologies of IM tactics, which provide meaningful categorization of the diverse range of IM behaviour. Two of the most influential typologies are developed by Bolino et al. (2008) and Mohamed et al. (1999). Bolino et al. (2008) proposed a goal-oriented typology aimed at maximising or minimising good or bad perceptions of the subject while Mohamed et al. (1999)'s taxonomy was centred on the focal point of presentation (direct versus indirect) and the purpose of the strategy (assertive versus defensive).

Mohamed and colleagues (1999) were among the first to advance a taxonomy of OIM tactics employed by organisations, and it remained one of the most frequently referenced (Bolino et al., 2008). Developed as a 2x2 categorization scheme, the taxonomy has two dimensions - direct versus indirect and assertive versus defensive. Direct and indirect tactics differ on the focal point of information presentation. Direct tactics present information that is closely associated with the actor, such as his characteristics and capabilities. Conversely, the information in indirect tactics is related to objects or people that the actor is linked to. The purpose of an assertive strategy is to enhance an actor's image while a defensive strategy's objective is to reduce or repair damaged reputations. Originally conceptualized as individual behaviours, the tactics were then modified and applied to the organisational context.

Bolino and colleagues (2008) proposed an outcome-oriented typology represented by a 2x4 matrix along two dimensions - subject of focus and goal. The subject of focus is either the actor or the target while the goal is to minimise or maximise the good or bad perceptions of the subject. Among the four goals, maximising good and minimising bad are the most intuitive and hence strategies to achieve these goals were extensively studied. The objective of maximising good is parallel to an assertive strategy while minimising bad is equivalent to a defensive strategy. Most studies in OIM have focused on minimising bad outcomes as an objective, while rarely do studies investigate the unique organisational situations of minimising good or maximising bad perceptions. Table 3 presents a synthesis of the OIM tactics (excluding some personal IM tactics which were not known to be applicable to organisations) in this typology. A list of tactics referenced by the typologies is defined in Appendix 2.

Table 3: Typology of OIM Tactics

Goal	Focus of OIM Tactic		
	Directly at Actor	**Indirectly at Actor**	**At Target**
Minimising good	Supplication	Blurring	-
Minimising bad	Demonstrative Disclaimer Illustrative Organisation handicapping Prosocial Behaviour Restitution	Blaring Burying	Accounts Apologies Excuses Justifications
Maximising good	Demonstrative Exemplification Illustrative Organisation Promotion	Boasting	Ingratiation
Maximising bad	Intimidation	-	-

Note: Adapted from Bolino et al, 2008 and Mohamed et al. (1999).

2.5 Impression Management on the Web and Social Media

The emergence and popularity of the Web 2.0 and social media in the last decade has provided a new platform for organisations and individuals to engage in IM and self-presentation. The characteristics of online communication - anonymity, asynchronicity and separation by distance, however, differ vastly from face-to-face, therefore rendering the study of online IM critical. The study of computer-mediated communication (CMC), defined as the "communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (Herring, 1996, p. 1) sheds light on this issue. Specifically, theories that describe the phenomena of cues-filtered-out (Culnan, 1987), such as the Social Presence Theory, are also applicable to CMC. CMC theories posit the lack of visual, audio and other observable non-verbal cues in online context has led to impersonal communication (Walther, 2011). Social information processing (Walther, 1992) and hyperpersonal CMC (Walther, 1996) theories challenge the earlier assumption by suggesting that the exploitation of the online media to overcome cue limitations may exceed the affinity experienced in face-to-face interactions, particularly in facilitating impressions.

2.5.1 Computer-mediated IM

Early perspectives of CMC suggest impression formations are inhibited due to the absence of nonverbal cues (Kiesler, 1986). Subsequent research challenges this view. Miller (1995) argued that the presentation of self and IM is still viable in CMC despite the difficulty in replicating the richness and depth of face-to-face communication in online interactions. Walther (1996) offered propositions for impression management through the development of the hyperpersonal model of CMC. The phenomenon of hyperpersonal CMC suggested that interactions in electronic communication platforms could be more emotional and socially desirable than in parallel face-to-face ones (Walther, 1996). Through the exploitation of interface and channel characteristics offered by CMC, messages in online dialogues can be created to enhance impression management.

The hyperpersonal CMC model identified four sociotechnical characteristics of CMC that facilitates online self-presentations: messages are editable, unlimited time in message editing, flexibility in conveying message and cognitive devotion to CMC. First, CMC allows its users to amend the message content to their satisfaction before sending out. Face-to-face interactions do not enjoy this affordance. Second, users can spend as much time as they wish to compose and edit a message, unlike in face-to-face situations where communications are more spontaneous. Third, the ability of users to accentuate their desired appearance is an affordance resulting from the masking of involuntary physical and non-verbal cues in CMC. Fourth, users devote more attention during CMC as cognitive resources are not required to cope with the symbolic and physical expressions of others. As such, Walther (1993, p. 394) argued that CMC enables its users to be “more cognitively mindful and deliberate in their message construction”. CMC therefore encourages careful reflection of communication goals and meticulous tailoring of messages (Walther, 1996, 2007). The applicability of the hyperpersonal CMC theory is, however, limited to text-based asynchronous communications, such as email messaging, for which the theory is specifically developed (Walther & Parks, 2002).

What are the dramaturgical devices that can be leveraged for IM on the web? The concept of symbol sets (Dennis, Fuller, & Valacich, 2008), derived from Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) symbol types, identified ways in which people can communicate information, through spoken language, non-verbal gestures, written or digital symbols, such as images and videos. In the online context devoid of physical, visual and verbal cues, research has suggested that online impressions can be developed based on language, content (Walther, 1993), typographic and chronemic information (Walther & Parks, 2002). Empirical studies subsequently showed that organisations and individuals who wished to foster online impressions can tap on the growing range of expressive resources available on the web, for example, images (Ramasubramanian, Gyure, & Mursi, 2003), video (Waung, Hymes, Beatty, & McAuslan, 2015), text content, typeface (Henderson, Giese, & Cote, 2004), layout and links (Winter et al., 2003). Videos have a higher degree of naturalness as it most resembles face-to-face interactions (Kock, 2004), but are rarely analysed as an IM instrument (except in studies by Lin, Younbo, and Sim (2015); Waung et al. (2015)). Written language on the other hand, has been more extensively researched as the dominant symbol set used in CMC, despite being less natural (Kock, 2004), slower to encode and decode (Dennis et al., 2008) and a lesser degree of presentation immediacy (O'Sullivan, Hunt, & Lippert, 2004). Walther (2007) found that impressions could be managed by varying the use of language, for example, using more verbiage when communicating to a more desirable audience. Texting as a form of sending short messages on mobile devices or on micro-blogging sites demonstrates that CMC users have adapted to the "brevity and economy of language" in the face of new communication technologies (Walther, 2012, p. 402).

Writing style can be a type of written tactic utilized by organisations to impress their stakeholders. A study by Sandberg and Holmlund (2015) on sustainability reports identified four writing styles – subjective, positive, vague and emotional, as OIM tactics. The subjective style of writing is demonstrated by organisations presenting their views on contested issues as if it represents widely accepted truths. By excluding divergent alternative views from their reports, organisations give the impression that its one-sided argument is the only position on sustainability. The positive writing style goes to the extent of magnifying the favourable aspects of the organisation's environmental efforts while softening the unfavourable. Favourable aspects of the organisation were given greater positive emphasis through the use of powerful business vocabulary, such as "comprehensive" business principles and "rigorous" sustainability standards (Sandberg & Holmlund, 2015, p. 684). Conversely, unfavourable events were either omitted or neutrally described, making it looked as if it was less negative than reality. When reporting precise information seems unappealing to the organisation, the vague writing style is put to use. Rhetorical expressions (e.g. 'whenever possible') and ambiguous phases (e.g. some, many, almost) indicate no clear meaning of the organisation's actions and may even confuse the reader. Finally, organisations may find an emotional style useful in evoking feelings from their readers. Visuals, narratives and explicit display of emotions (e.g. 'we are saddened') are typical examples of an emotional writing style.

2.5.2 OIM Tactics on the Web

So how can organisations use OIM tactics in CMC? Recent studies on IM in CMC have focused on the ways organisations manage their impressions on corporate websites, blogs and social networking sites. A website's proprietor is capable of shaping its audience opinions through editorial control on its web content (Walther & Jang, 2012). Illustrative and demonstrative IM tactics are examples of how organisations claimed commitment to the natural environment on their websites (Bansal & Kistruck, 2006). Illustrative tactics primarily manipulates the placement of information on the website, such as the prominent display of critical information and images in a simple and clear layout. Multiple images collectively conveyed the organisation's actions, while textual information tends to be general, broad-based, and easy to read and understand. Websites that use illustrative tactics therefore enable stakeholders to find relevant information fairly quickly and easily. On the other hand, demonstrative tactics emphasise on rich informational content, such as detailed quantitative information explaining environmental initiatives, proactive involvement, and financial investment. Demonstrative tactics provide high quality as well as high quantity of factual and auditable information for stakeholders to assess the organisation's environmental effort. Other readers, however, may be cognitively burdened by the technicality of the information and the difficulty of navigating deeply into the website in search of it. In summary, illustrative and demonstrative tactics can be complementary, as each appeal to a different group of audience with varying information processing abilities.

Corporate blogs offer a channel for organisations to adopt open communication tactics, namely broadcasting, dialoguing and inclusion, to exploit a range of proactive IM strategies (Gegenhuber & Dobusch, 2017). By disclosing relevant information, such as strategic plans, decisions and data to external audiences, broadcasting is a one-way communication mode that creates an impression of dedication and superiority through exemplification. Broadcasting also elicits supplication when organisations attempt to gain sympathy for its mistakes and shortcomings. Self-promotion is fostered when organisations broadcast or publish positive data that depicts them as competent and high achievers. Dialoguing, on the other hand, involves two-way communication that engages the audience in soliciting and giving feedback. It is both an instrument for organisation promotion and ingratiation that renders the organisation likeable to its audience. Inclusion, through user voting on blogs, is a way of involving stakeholders in organisational decision-making. Like dialoguing, inclusion can be an effective ingratiation tool.

On social networking sites that are characterised by two-way interactions, a variety of tactics was used. Upholding social acceptability and promoting credibility were two sets of IM strategies that can be employed as communicative resources by business with consumer interactions on corporate Facebook pages (Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2014). As social networking platforms became more pervasive, organisations are not only learning to communicate in the online environment, they are also exploring ways to manage their online reputation through IM strategies. The first strategy of upholding social acceptability includes conventional politeness, moral discourses and diversion. Conventional politeness is exhibited through the use of greeting, signing off, thanking and apologizing to consumers who post on the Facebook page. An organisation engages in moral discourse when it wished to present itself as moral or dismisses the other party as immoral. A diversion strategy is particularly common for organisation representatives to avoid answering to active critics. Two ways of doing so include reference to earlier posts that contain partial replies, but are difficult to find; and changing the subject topic of the discussion. The second strategy of promoting credibility can be achieved by category entitlement and stake, varying footings as well as ridicule. Category entitlement and stake (Potter, 1996) relates to an organisation's credibility and interest in protecting its image. For instance, the company loses credibility, that is, its category entitlement, when confronted by the public about the dishonesty of a reply. Separately, stake arguments were used to undermine the credibility of critics to protect the company's interests (or stakes). Organisations could vary footings to draw closer or distant themselves from what they are saying, and ultimately varying the extent to which they are held responsible. Finally, ridicule is also used to undermine the other party's credibility, and in doing so, other observers may hold back their criticisms regarding similar issues.

Research on OIM in computer-mediated environments is still in the nascent stage (Walther, 2011; Bolino, Long & Turnley, 2016). While the corpus of studies on self-presentation by individuals in social networking sites is fast growing, research attention on OIM on the web has been limited. This situation parallels with the offline context, as Bolino et al. (2008) note that the investigations of IM at the organisational level are scarce. Table 4 summarises a list of conceptual and empirical studies on IM by organisations as well as IM on the web.

Table 4: Summary of IM research relevant to the current research

Source	Context of research	Findings relevant to this study	Implications to this study
Busenbark, Lange & Certo (2017)	Managing impressions of financial security analysis	Foreshadowing is an anticipatory tactic that releases vague information about a firm's potential future strategic activities without revealing valuable internal information to competitors.	Organisations use anticipatory foreshadowing to improve public perceptions.
Gegenhuber & Dobusch (2017)	Impression management by organisations on blogs	Open strategy practices, such as broadcasting, dialoguing and inclusion, enable organisations to shape the perceptions of external audiences through exemplification, organisational promotion, supplication, and ingratiation.	Some IM tactics are effective instruments for organisations to manage public impressions on the web.
Bolino, Long and Turnley (2016)	Review of literature on impression management in workplaces	Research on impression management using technology is an emerging area.	This study attempts to build on the emerging literature on impression management in the virtual context.
Benthaus, Risius & Beck (2016)	Impression management by organisations on Twitter	Social media management tools support OIM to improve the public perception of a firm.	IM is viable online, both in social media and web-based contexts.
Brandon-Lai, Armstrong & Ferris (2016)	Image management by sports service organisations	The concept of organisation impression congruence suggests an alignment between the desired organisation images projected by management and employees, and it elicits positive outcomes.	Organisations need to ensure multiple images complement one another.

Source	Context of research	Findings relevant to this study	Implications to this study
Tata and Prasad (2015)	Corporate social responsibility communication	Four dimensions of tactics utilized by organisations include: - Anticipatory versus reactive - Assertive versus protective - Direct versus indirect - Image enhancing versus image correcting	Tactics in the offline setting may be applicable to the online context.
Sandberg & Holmlund (2015)	Corporate social responsibility reporting	Writing styles can be OIM tactics: subjective, positive, vague, emotional	The writing styles are relevant to websites.
Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen (2014)	Organisation impression management on Facebook	Upholding social acceptability (including conventional politeness, moral discourses and diversion strategy) and promoting credibility (including category entitlement and stake, varying footings, and ridicule) are broad IM strategies used by organisations with consumer interactions on Facebook.	Social acceptability and credibility are favourable corporate images that organisations maintain and promote.
van Halderen, Bhatt, Berens, Brown & van Riel (2014)	Impression management of organisations under pressure	IM tactics are used by organisations in 4 phases over rising pressures: 1. Advocate initial stance 2. Sense-giving to clarify initial stance 3. Repair image 4. Adjust stance	Tactics to cope with public pressures may be applicable to the online context.
Schniederjans, Cao & Schniederjans (2013)	Organisation impression management on social networks	Direct-assertive IM strategies (i.e. ingratiation, intimidation, organisation promotion and supplication, except exemplification) used on social media results in positive improvement on a firm's financial performance.	Direct-assertive IM strategies are effective on corporate websites.

Source	Context of research	Findings relevant to this study	Implications to this study
Sandeep, Ravishankar & Hislop (2013)	Organisations with conflicting orientations	Organisations use two main tactics to cope with its commercial and social stakeholders: strategic disclosure (through images of competency and legitimacy) and social congruence (images of responsibility and conformance to social norms).	Images of competency, legitimacy, responsibility and conformance help organisations to mitigate identity challenges.
Walther & Jang (2012)	Computer-mediated communications	The messages on participatory websites (e.g. social networking & product review sites) can be classified as proprietor content, user-generated content, deliberate aggregate user representations & incidental aggregate user representations.	Retail websites resemble "proprietor content", which can shape user responses through editorial control on video, pictures and text.
Walther (2012)	Review of theories on computer-mediated communication	The study reviews how language can be adapted to electronic text (e.g. abbreviations in Twitter), and how visual cues (pictures & graphics) can alter the way language is used in messaging.	Text, graphics and pictures remain as the main components of online messages.
Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger & Shapiro (2012)	Organisation crisis after wrongdoing	Technical actions taken by the organisation address the cause of the wrongdoing, but may reinforce negative impressions. Ceremonial actions emphasise the organisation's positive traits but maybe interpreted by stakeholders as self-serving.	Technical and ceremonial actions can be part of organisations' communications to the public.
Graffin, Carpenter & Boivie (2011)	Organisation leader succession appointments	Organisations release 'strategic noise' (corporate communications) simultaneously as CEO succession is announced. This is a type of anticipatory obfuscation when events are negative and ambiguous.	Organisations use anticipatory obfuscation to distract stakeholders from unfavourable events.

Source	Context of research	Findings relevant to this study	Implications to this study
Walther (2011; 1996)	Hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication	Theories on interpersonal computer-mediated communication (CMC) explain how people adapt and exploit electronic media to overcome cue limitations. CMC is theorised as "hyperpersonal" as it can be more socially desirable than face-to-face communications.	As users of CMC, owners/managers of retail websites can selectively self-present and therefore manage impressions more strategically than in face-to-face interactions.
Hargis & Watt (2010)	Organisation perception management	The review suggests two approaches towards organisation perception management. The proactive approach makes use of strategic business behaviour (through corporate webpage) and acclaim accounts to establish corporate reputation. The reactive approach makes use of defensive accounts to rebuild damaged reputation.	Proactive and reactive approaches appear relevant to the online context as well.
Holladay (2009)	Organisation crisis communications	Organisations use reputation repair strategies in conjunction with information giving strategies, but to a lesser extent than recommended by the literature.	Information-giving strategies may be relevant on websites.
Caldiero, Taylor & Ungureanu (2009)	Organisation image repair during crisis	The most commonly used tactics to repair corporate image during crisis include corrective action, shifting the blame, bolstering, good intentions and transcendence.	Image-repairing tactics can be executed on websites.
Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley & Gilstrap (2008)	Review of organisation and individual impression management	The literature review suggests a 2x2 matrix of maximising or minimising good or bad. The typology of tactics includes maximising good, maximising bad, minimising good or minimising bad.	Maximising and minimising strategies in offline setting may still be relevant in the online context.

Source	Context of research	Findings relevant to this study	Implications to this study
Dennis, Fuller & Valacich (2008)	Media synchronicity theory	Symbol set is one of the capabilities of media that facilitates communication, as posited in the Media Synchronicity Theory. Symbol sets comprise of physical gestures, visual, verbal, written words, images and videos.	Written words, images and videos are types of symbols that can be used on websites.
Walther (2007)	Interpersonal computer-mediated communication	There is linguistic variation (more verbiage is used) when communicating to different (desirable versus less desirable) targets.	Impressions can be managed by varying the use of language when communicating to different groups of online audiences.
Bansal & Kistruck (2006)	Corporate social responsibility communication	Illustrative and demonstrative IM tactics used on corporate websites are complementary and appeal to different audience groups.	Websites may focus either on abundance of imagery (illustrative) or detailed information (demonstrative) to influence perceptions.
Elsbach (2003, 2006)	Review of organisation perception management	Four types of symbolic actions can be used to manage organisation perceptions: - Verbal accounts - Categorization of organisations - Symbolic behaviours - Display of physical markers	Symbolic actions in the offline setting may be adapted to the online context.
Mohamed, Gardner & Paolilo (1999)	Organisation impression management	A typology of OIM tactics was proposed based on a 2x2 matrix - direct versus indirect, assertive versus defensive.	OIM tactics in the offline setting provides the baseline reference when adapted to the online context.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a background of the parent theories of IM, beginning with mathematical theory of communication, symbolic interactionalism and then to dramaturgy, so as to provide an understanding of IM's theoretical roots. Using dramaturgy theory, the chapter illustrated how individuals manage impressions through self-presentation, strategic information control and the specific techniques including dramatisation, concealment and audience segregation. Organisations, on the other hand, utilise IM to achieve communicative objectives through proactive, remedial and anticipatory tactics that are driven either by motivation or situation.

Literature on IM is mostly centred on face-to-face interactions until in recent years, as a growing volume of research suggests IM is viable in computer-mediated communication. Research on organisational IM on the web is however, still in an infancy stage.

The inclusion of theories such as information theory, symbolic interactionalism and hyperpersonal computer-mediated communication theory in Chapter 2 is to provide background information in understanding the key concepts (such as strategic information control and OIM tactics) employed to develop the thesis' conceptual framework in Chapter 3. Chapter 2 reviewed extant literature along two dimensions – level of analysis (individual versus organisational) and communication media (face-to-face versus computer-mediated). See Figure 4. The next chapter reviews IM-related concepts and applications in the online retail context.

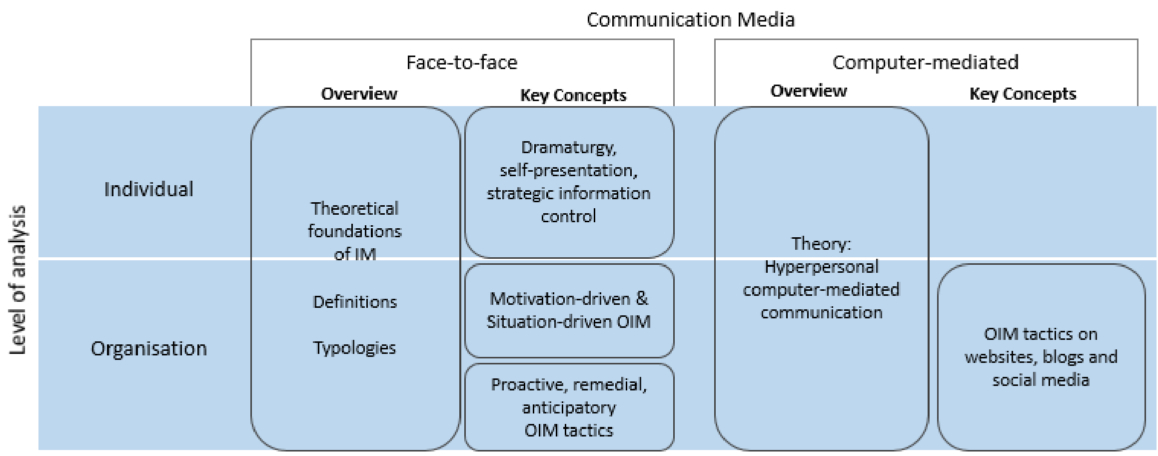

Figure 4: A visual summary of the review of extant literature in Chapter 2

CHAPTER 3: CONTEXTUALISING THE LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 3 builds on the theoretical underpinnings established in chapter 2 to draw out the research context in relation to two areas: (a) information problems and information transparency strategies, and (b) online retail store image (see Figure 5). This chapter begins with a brief introduction of the online retail landscape and the information challenges in which contemporary information issues are rooted. The chapter then explores strategies to overcome these challenges in a digital economy. For organisations in the retail industry, retail store image could be exploited as a means of IM. The chapter also argues that Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy and IM theories complements the information transparency strategies described in the IS literature as well as retail store image concept in the marketing literature.

Two other contextual considerations that shaped the review include the nature of business (i.e. small businesses) and geographical location (i.e. Singapore). Taken together, the key concepts in chapters 2 and 3 are developed into a conceptual framework for the thesis. The conceptual framework forms the basis on which the inquiry is conducted, and influenced the way findings are interpreted.

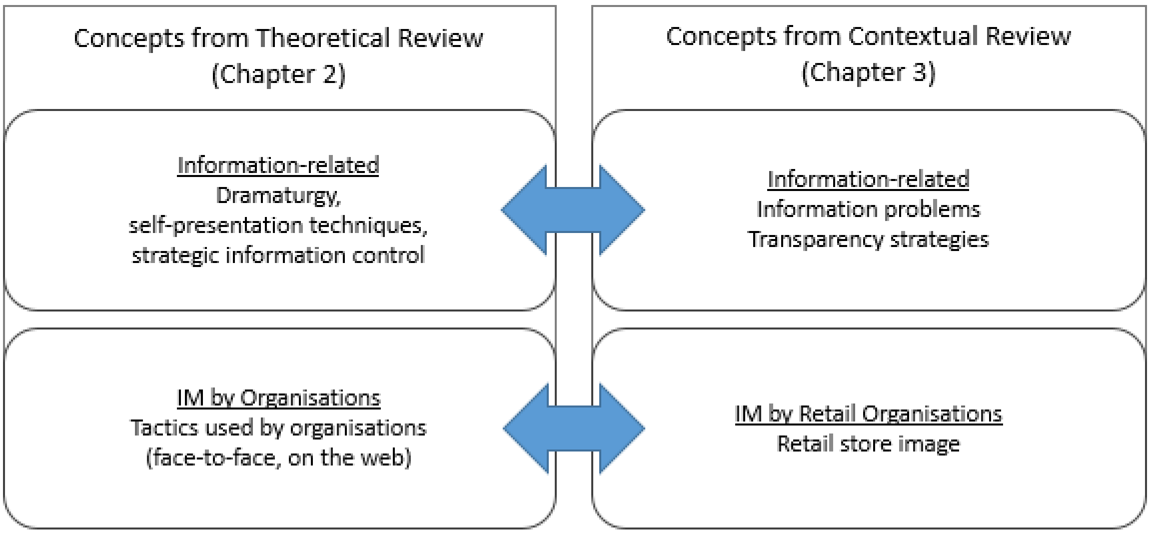

Figure 5: Mapping of concepts from theoretical to contextual review

3.2 Online Retail

Retail, by definition, involves the selling of goods, not services (Hortaçsu & Syverson, 2015). The definition of retail in the United States (US) refers to the sector as comprising of "establishments engaged in retailing merchandise, generally without transformation, and rendering services incidental to the sale of merchandise" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). In Singapore, the retail trade sector focuses on "positioning, marketing, selling and distributing goods to consumers" (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2016). Retail establishments are defined as entities "selling merchandise directly to the consumers" (Singstat, 2016a, p. 8). Both definitions place emphasis on the sale of merchandise defined as consumer goods, that is, physical, tangible objects. Building on the earlier definitions, online retail or e-retail is defined as "the sale of goods and services via the Internet or other electronic channels, for personal or household use by consumers" (Harris & Dennis, 2008, p. 261). It encompasses all activities of e-commerce under the business-to-consumer (B2C) sector.

The B2C e-market has been experiencing cycles of explosive growth and massive failures since its commencement in the mid-1990s (Laudon & Traver, 2013). During the early years of e-commerce or the first wave from 1995 to 2003 (G. P. Schneider, 2013), the ease of e-market entry had drawn eager entrepreneurs, who flocked by the thousands, to setup e-stores selling retail goods in the online marketplace. As rapidly as the boom had started in 1997, many start-ups failed during the early 2000s, leading to the 'dot com bust'. The e-businesses from the first era of e-commerce that survived till today were powerful brand names, such as Amazon, Priceline and Expedia, who overcame multiple challenges (Laudon & Traver, 2013). They had to adjust their business models, integrate online and offline operations and understand consumer attitudes and online consumption behaviour. The emergence of Web 2.0 technologies during the second wave (2004-2009), as well as the popularity of mobile devices and social networking sites during the third wave (2010-present) has provided immense growth opportunities for firms to reach out to both local and global consumers (Schneider, 2013). In the ever-competitive e-commerce market, challenges remained, if not intensified over the years. Among the myriad of challenges, this chapter explores issues associated with the management of information visibility as well as retail store image.

3.2.1 Information Problems in Online Retail

Scholars have attributed the underlying issue that surrounds the information problem in online markets to asymmetric and imperfect market information (Löfgren, Persson, & Weibull, 2002). Asymmetric information happens when one side of the market, for instance, the seller, is better informed than the prospective buyer. Long before the Internet era, the nature of information in historic financial markets was inherently asymmetric (Stiglitz, 2000). Adverse selection is an example of an information problem that occurs when a party makes an unfavourable choice due to a lack of factual information. In the e-commerce context, hidden information, a term coined by Arrow (1984), relates to the misrepresentation of product information and true traits of the seller prior to the transaction.

3.2.1.1 Information Availability

Other than hidden information, availability, overload, and equivocality are three prevailing information problems that had attracted much attention from researchers in the IS field. The phenomenon of information availability in the e-marketplace and its associated benefits were predicted with much anticipation in the 1990s. Electronic marketplaces were assumed to make more efficient distribution of information, as explained by the efficient market hypothesis (Fama, 1970), which posited that in financial investment markets, prices are fair and perfect because it "fully reflect *(sic)* all available information" (Fama, 1991, p. 1575). The efficiency of e-marketplaces was expected to benefit buyers more than sellers. Buyers enjoy lower search costs, make better purchase decisions due to being more informed, and most importantly, pay lower prices due to price convergence (Bakos, 1997). Increased information availability on the Internet had also resulted in greater 'consumer informedness', which is the degree to which consumers know about the details of products and services, such as its attributes, price and the store to buy them (Clemons, 2008). Consumers became more informed due to the ease of searching online (Bakos, 1997), the availability of product recommendation systems (Pathak, Garfinkel, Gopal, Venkatesan, & Yin, 2010; Zhang, Agarwal, & Lucas Jr, 2011), seller reputation mechanisms (Dellarocas, 2005), third-party review sites (Chen, Liu & Zhang, 2012; Chen & Xie, 2005), collaborative filtering (Benlian, Titah, & Hess, 2012; Herlocker, Konstan, Terveen, & Riedl, 2004) and, social commerce platforms (Garg, Smith, & Telang, 2011; Stephen & Toubia, 2010).

To the seller, determining the extent of disclosure of information to consumers is a challenge, as failure to provide adequate information to meet consumers' ever-growing demand is likely to result in loss of sales (Markopoulos & Clemons, 2013). Strategies for product information disclosure provided a useful guide for the seller when it comes to the decision on investing in marketing communications and promotions. Jovanovic (1982) first studied the decisions of sellers to disclose product quality, and concluded that disclosure can be truthful, although at a cost. Other scholars have demonstrated that high quality products deserve more disclosure because of the likelihood of attracting more buyers since these products have a higher value to customers (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006; Dellarocas, Zhang, & Awad, 2007; Duan, Gu, & Whinston, 2008; Jovanovic, 1982). The same 'quality unravelling argument' (Markopoulos & Clemons, 2013) applies to long-tail products (Brynjolfsson, Hu, & Simester, 2011), low variance products (Markopoulos & Clemons, 2013), and high variance products with low quality (Sun, 2012). Low-cost products consumed by expert users would benefit from increased marketing after online reviews are published. On the other hand, novice users of high-cost products do not benefit from additional product information, and sellers of such products are advised against providing more information about them (Chen & Xie, 2005). Conversely, less disclosure is needed for hyper-differentiated products (Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006) and taste-related products when buyers are highly driven by reviews (Chen & Xie, 2005).

3.2.1.2 Information Overload and Equivocality

The second and third issue of the information problem relates to the 'dark side' of information, that is, overload and equivocality (Grover, Lim, & Ayyagari, 2006). Information overload occurs when more than the required amount of information is present, and often due to an "overabundance of irrelevant information" (Ackoff, 1967, p. 147). The effects of overload includes overwhelming of the individual into a state of incapability of surmising relevant information for decision making (Grover et al., 2006), thereby leading to a 'paradox of choice' (Bawden & Robinson, 2009). As sellers in the e-market could decide the level of information to provide to consumers, they can choose to overload buyers in an attempt to influence their purchase decisions. When consumers were presented with a large amount of information, they were found to use price as a cue to infer quality judgments (Chang & Wildt, 1996). Sellers were also vigilant of consumers' choice of strategy, and therefore reacted accordingly by employing market segmentation based on prices (Grover et al., 2006). Sellers targeting the price-seeking segment of consumers who are willing to pay high prices may use high-scope marketing cues (Akdeniz, Calantone, & Voorhees, 2014; Gidron, Koehler, & Tversky, 1993), such as brand reputation (Baek, Kim, & Yu, 2010; Tsao, Pitt, & Berthon, 2006). On the contrary, price-averse consumers typically respond better to low-price strategy with low-scope cues, such as promotional sales (Koçaş, 2005). Under conditions of information overload, sellers could select from different pricing strategies depending on the targeted customer segment.

Equivocality arises in situations of ambiguity, and where multiple and contradictory interpretations exists (Daft & Lengel, 1986). In the context of online shopping, information equivocality tends to hinder the buying decision of consumers as they are faced with incomplete or ambiguous information. As such, consumers turned to online product ratings, expert recommendations or feedback systems to obtain third-party opinions. Online feedback, however, is subjected to selection bias (Li & Hitt, 2008). Differences in feedback ratings led to varying perceptions of product quality, which in turn resulted in the variance in reservation price, that is, the amount consumers are willing to pay. Consumers heterogeneity in reservation prices is an area that sellers can target to execute their pricing strategies (Grover et al., 2006). A low-price strategy with high sales volume seems warranted if the target consumers favour low reservation prices. Otherwise a high-price strategy might yield more profits for the seller in a market segment where consumers are known to set a high reservation price.

3.2.2 Information Strategies in a Digital Economy

Apart from the above-mentioned strategies, recent research in digital business strategy suggested that managing information transparency (Granados & Gupta, 2013) and information visibility (Grover & Kohli, 2013) is critical to e-business survival. To compete effectively in the digital environment, Granados and Gupta (2013) contended that firms need to deploy technologies to enable the dynamic capability of selective information disclosure. Information transparency strategies is one such approach to produce, manage and selectively disclose information to external stakeholders of the firm. Through the strategic options of disclosure, distortion, bias and concealment, a firm could align the transparency strategy to its overall business strategy (Granados & Gupta, 2013). Providing comprehensive product information could appeal to buyers who desire more information about a firm's offerings, while making prices more transparent might in fact invite intense competition and lower market prices (Soh, Markus, & Goh, 2006). A firm, therefore has to consider its blend of transparency options for each information element carefully.

Informed decisions regarding different information visibility can be a core competitive strategy. Firms developing micro-applications need to be sensitive to the visibility of the applications' components to avoid imitation from competitors. Using a software development case study, Grover and Kohli (2013) cautioned users of the indiscriminate digitization of products and services on Internet and mobile platforms without due consideration for revealing the firm's competitive value. Such an action tends to erode profits and impede innovative progress, which can be detrimental to a firm's sustainability in the hyper-competitive market. Managing the visibility dilemma requires IT firms to determine the value appropriation trade-offs for three critical components - software applications, processes and information. For example, information is usually the key element that adds value to the firm or its customers, thus as a source of input (e.g. patient data), is often a protected asset. On the other hand, the output (e.g. food nutrition) of the application is information that is available to the public. In essence, the real value should lie in the hidden components and remain invisible to competitors so as to limit the extent of imitation.

In summary, the information problems that surfaced in e-markets can be traced back to its roots in information asymmetry. In the context of B2C e-commerce, these challenges are manifested as 'consumer informedness' due to an explosion of information availability, information overload and information equivocality. Extant literature has suggested a number of counter-strategies for retailers to adopt in the face of these challenges.

3.3 Retail Store Image

To gain an understanding on retail firms' IM towards their external stakeholders, this section switches to a review of the marketing literature, and specifically on the topic of store image. Store image has been extensively studied in the context of the traditional, physical retail stores. Despite difficulty in conceptualising store image for decades (May, 1974), the field has since advanced with multiple categorisations of the dimensions that made up store image. Beginning with Martineau (1958), who is widely recognised as the first scholar to suggest store image as a source of competitive advantage (Burt et al., 2007), many definitions of store image has since been proposed. Martineau (1958) described store image or store personality as "the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes" (p. 47). A store image is "more than the sum of its parts", argued Oxenfeldt (1974, p. 9) who further elaborated that store image combines both facts and emotions. Martineau (1958) suggested the major elements that made up a store image in the minds of consumers are layout and architecture (e.g. store fixtures), symbols and colours, advertising and sales personnel. Lindquist (1974) identified nine store attributes that contribute to the formation of an image – merchandise (quality, assortment, pricing), service (general, self-service, delivery), clientele (social class appeal), physical facilities (lighting, washrooms), convenience (location, parking), promotion (sales, advertising), store atmosphere (congeniality, feelings of warmth), institutional factors (reputation, reliability) and post-transaction satisfaction (returns).

The advent of e-commerce called for the development of an online store image that takes into account important online traits (for example, data privacy) as well as the exclusion of inapplicable physical store attributes (for example, store location). Online store image is conceptualised based on the established literature of 'traditional' store image (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004). Not only do the dimensions of online store image differ from that of a traditional, physical retail store, retailer image has a greater impact on online than offline stores (Biswas & Biswas, 2004). Based on a study of an online bookshop, Van der Heijden and Verhagen (2002, 2004) found seven components, that is, store usefulness, store style, enjoyment, ease of use, familiarity, trustworthiness and settlement performance, constituted store image. Of these components, store style, store usefulness and ease of use were the most important attributes (Chang & Tseng, 2013).

Recent research on online store image has established its effect on consumer behavioural outcomes. Online store merchandise and online store atmosphere were found to influence consumers' purchase intention (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009) and customer loyalty (Yun & Good, 2007). Other influencers include e-service, online store navigation, store usefulness and performance on delivery (Chen & Teng, 2013; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009; Yun & Good, 2007). A favourable online store image also positively affects consumer's perception of value in online shopping, which in turn motivates repurchase intention (Chang & Tseng, 2013). Table 5 lists the empirical studies of two existing veins of research conducted on online store image.

While store image can be conceptualised from both production (that is, selling) and consumption (that is, buying) perspectives (Burt et al., 2007), studies have focused on measuring consumer perspectives as the retail store image is often construed as an overall impression perceived by consumers (Keaveney & Hunt, 1992). An exception is the research conducted by Oppewal and Timmermans (1997). Perspectives from both sides (that is, selling and buying) have demonstrated that differences frequently exist (May, 1974; McClure & Ryans, 1968) and a reconciliation of perceptions is important but was under-researched (Birtwistle, Clarke, & Freathy, 1999; Osman, 1993). Store image congruity serves as an indicator of the (mis)match between the retailer's perceived importance of store image dimensions and that of their customers (Osman, 1993). A low degree of congruence may potentially erode customer loyalty (Birtwistle et al., 1999). Past research that contrasted perceptions of retail store management and consumers was rare and was limited to the physical retail store environment (for example, (Birtwistle et al., 1999). A critical area for further research therefore involves the study of online store image from the firm's perspective, which could then be used to compare with that of the consumers'.

Table 5: Two observed themes in online store image literature from the consumer's perspective

Common theme	Relevant Findings	Context of Research	Source
Identification of store attributes that constitute online image	A multi-channel store image is comprised of product offering, price, layout, accessibility, promotions, customer service, advice, reputation, institution (i.e. presentation of retailer), and connections with other channels.	Common measurement of online and offline store image	Bèzes (2014)
	The attribute 'product offering' is directly persuasive while presentation of the retailer and promotions are indirectly persuasive.	Persuasive dimensions of multi-channel store image	Bezes (2015)
	Store style, usefulness and ease of use are the most important store image attributes.	Moderating factors on the relation between online store image and purchase intention	Chang and Tseng (2013)
	A thematic and picture-based website leads to a positive store image.	Web design factors that determine online store image	Oh, Fiorito, Cho, and Hofacker (2008)
	Online store image is comprised of store usefulness, ease of use, store style, trustworthiness of store, settlement performance, consumer enjoyment, and consumer's familiarity with the store.	Development of measures for online retail store image	Van der Heijden and Verhagen (2002, 2004)
Effect of online image on consumer behavioural outcomes	Online store image influences purchase intention through perceived value, but not through perceived risk. Of the two types of value, utilitarian value has greater influence than hedonic value.	Moderating factors on the relation between online store image and purchase intention	Chang and Tseng (2013)
	Two components of retailer's store image, i.e. performance on delivery and store usefulness, influenced consumers' online purchase intention.	Influence of online store image on purchase intention	Chen and Teng (2013)
	Both online and offline store images influenced consumers to purchase online.	Influence of multi-channel store image on purchase intention	Verhagen and Van Dolen (2009)
	Three components of online retail store image, i.e. e-merchandise, e-service, e-shopping atmosphere, influences patronage intentions and leads to loyalty.	Influence of online store image on customer loyalty	Yun and Good (2007)

3.4 Small Business

The second context of this study relates to small businesses. Varied definitions of the term 'small business' exist in different regions of the world and there is no universal agreement on a single definition (Longenecker, Petty, Palich, & Hoy, 2013). Most definitions of small business include specifying the number of employees, annual turnover and amount of assets owned (Burgess, 2016). A small business in Australia is often referred to as one that employs fewer than 20 people, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Australian Securities & Investments Commission, 2015). In the UK, a Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) is defined as any business with fewer than 250 employees (Ward & Rhodes, 2014). The US definition is guided by size standards, and a retail trade business is deemed small if it has 500 or fewer employees (SBA, 2016). In Singapore, SME is defined as a company with "annual sales turnover of not more than S$100 million or employment size not more than 200 workers" (SPRING Singapore, 2013). As the definition of SME in Singapore is too broad for the purpose of this study, the term 'small business' is used instead. A small business is one "with growth potential that is small compared to large companies in an industry, has geographically localized operations, is financed by only a few individuals, and has a small management team" (Longenecker et al., 2013, p. 5). This study adopts Burgess' (2009) definition of a small business as one with 1 to 20 employees.

Small businesses are an important pillar to countries' economies as they contribute significantly to employment, innovation and growth (OECD, 2015). Similarly, SMEs play a pivotal role in Singapore's economy. According to the Department of Statistics (Singapore), there are approximately 188,000 SMEs in Singapore, constituting 99% of all companies as of 2015 (Singstat, 2015). More than 70% of the city-state workforce is employed by SMEs, and they contribute 50% of the annual Gross Domestic Product (ChannelNewsAsia, 2013b), amounting to an estimated $200 billion in 2015 (Singstat, 2016b). Not only are the small business sector's contributions substantial going by the statistics, it also plays an important role in driving the renewal of the economy "through birth, death and restructuring" (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015, p. ii).

Despite its economic significance, small businesses have received relatively less research attention than large enterprises. Much of what we know today about business is drawn from the extensive study of a tiny proportion of big firms and comparatively little is known about smaller firms (Pett & Wolff, 2012). Researchers also cautioned that SMEs are not to be mistaken as scaled-down versions of enterprises (Low, 2005), and they are "not a little big business" as Welsh and White (1981) asserted. Therefore organisation theories developed based on studies on large enterprises may not be directly applicable to SMEs (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015). Recognizing this gap, a growing body of literature has been addressing the issues faced by small businesses in the past two decades (Pett & Wolff, 2012).

A resource-based view of the firm is helpful towards acquiring a better understanding of the nature of small businesses. The resources of a firm include "all assets, capabilities, organisational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge etc controlled by a firm that enable a firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness" (Barney, 1991, p. 101). Based on the above definition and the three classifications of resources – physical, human and organisational capital resources, a small business is typically characterised as under-resourced. In terms of physical capital resources, a small business has low capitalisation, limited bargaining powers in buying from suppliers and is confined to a localised community or region (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015). When it comes to human capital resources, a small business is often limited by its managerial and technical manpower (Ghobakhloo et al., 2012), 'know how' or 'how to' knowledge (Parker & Castleman, 2007), as well as marketing and selling capabilities (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015). Small businesses are also low on organisational resources as management practices tend to be informal and decision-making is centralised at the hands of the owners or top managers (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015).

The inherent characteristics of a small business bring about many challenges. Compared to large enterprises, they are more open and vulnerable to the external environment and market forces (Bharati & Chaudhury, 2015, p. vi). For small businesses to cope with challenges, existing literature has recommended a focus on the business value of ICT to improve substantive performance through internal operational productivity and supply chain efficiency (Levy & Powell, 2004; Parker & Castleman, 2007). Recent work has redirected this focus to exploit the opportunities provided by the Internet. Studies have shown that many small businesses begin their online presence with a simple website and gradually worked on adding functionalities to the site (Fitzgerald & Alonso Mendo, 2005; Levy & Powell, 2004). They also establish their presence on third party websites, including social media sites, business directories (Burgess, 2016) and e-marketplaces. As web technologies matured, cost-conscious small businesses are able to leverage Web 2.0 tools to engage in more effective communications with customers to better understand and address customer requirements (Barnes et al., 2012). However, small e-businesses may face the additional difficulty of exploiting value from their online ventures due to the lack of IT competencies (Ashurst, Cragg, & Herring, 2011). In short, it is appears that small firms face more challenges to survive than large firms (Winter et al., 2009).

3.5 Singapore: A growing e-Commerce Market

The third context of this study is the e-commerce market in Singapore. Positioned as the gateway to Southeast Asia's booming e-markets, Singapore has enjoyed one of the largest e-commerce growth in the region (Kearney, 2015). Singapore accounted for the largest share of 25% (that is, US$1.7 billion) out of the total estimated sales for the ASEAN[5] market at US$7 billion in 2013 (Kearney, 2015). As a whole, ASEAN's e-commerce growth rate is expected to soar at 25% annually (2013-2017), up from 15% in the preceding four years. Singapore, alone was projected to expand its online retail market size by four-fold, from $1.1 billion in 2010 to $4.4 billion in 2015 by PayPal (Mediabuzz, 2011). Facilitated by increased ownership of computing and mobile devices, wider availability of Internet connectivity, and advancement in computer literacy, purchases made over the Internet are expected to be increasingly prevalent among Singapore households (Teo & Chan, 2015). Singapore's e-commerce market is still in its infancy, as sales of online retail in Singapore only comprised of 4% to 5% of the total retail sales (Kearney, 2015). When compared to the sales volume of advanced Internet economies of Europe (7.8%), China (7.2%) and US (5.8%), Singapore's e-market clearly has room for further growth.

3.5.1 Consumers: Profile and Shopping Behaviour

More than two-thirds (73%) of the city-state's population (5.5 million) is Internet users (4.0 million), and among them, 3.2 million (80% of online users) are online shoppers, according to Kearney (2015). Online buyers are typically younger. About half of Singapore's Internet users are below 35 years old (Kearney, 2015). Of the younger adults aged 25 to 44, slightly more than one-third (about 36% to 41%) have made an online purchase (Teo & Chan, 2015). As expected, higher income households tend to spend more while shopping on the Internet. The average monthly household expenses and online spending for households who have made at least one online purchase were both higher than the averages of all households, at $6,520 and $260 compared to $4,720 and $82 respectively (Teo & Chan, 2015). Two-thirds of the overall

[5] ASEAN is made up of six countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

online expenditure came from middle and upper income groups, reported PayPal (Mediabuzz, 2011).

The items that are most frequently bought on the Internet by Singaporeans are travel (e.g. air-tickets, hotel accommodation and package tours) and apparel (e.g. clothing and footwear), constituting 77% of the total online expenditure (Teo & Chan, 2015). The other categories of items frequently bought online include games/toys/hobbies, cinema tickets, newspapers (Teo & Chan, 2015), IT/electronics, gifts/collectives and general insurance (Mediabuzz, 2011). Besides patronizing the local e-marketplaces, Singaporean online shoppers made purchases from overseas websites too. Items bought overseas are vastly different from the local purchases. Overseas purchases include mostly books, movies/music/video games while local purchases typically comprises of movie/event tickets and general insurance (Mediabuzz, 2011).

3.5.2 Businesses: Opportunities and Challenges

Encouraged by the favourable business environment in Singapore[6] and the ease of e-market entry, many businesses had established their e-commerce operations in the island-nation. Not only are foreign e-marketplace players, such as Taobao[7] (from China), Rakuten (from Japan), Qoo10 (previously known as Gmarket from Korea), Groupon, and Deal.com (both from US) attracted to Singapore, countless other small and local start-ups have since come and gone.

E-commerce remains attractive to small businesses as it provides quick access to new growth channels through a wider pool of consumers in global markets. Small-and-medium enterprises (SMEs) in Singapore are given support by the government to invest in innovative activities that boost productivity, reduce operational costs and eventually increase sales. Initiatives and schemes supporting businesses' effort in venturing into the local e-commerce market were put in place as early as the mid-1990s. SMEs that have set their eyes on internationalization are able to leverage on collaborations with major e-marketplaces such as Amazon and Taobao's T-mall from 2015 (Lim, Pang, Poh, & Tailor, 2015).

While the emergence and rise of e-commerce has provided a wealth of opportunities, the online marketplace is abound with challenges too. Rakuten, the Japanese Internet services giant, had announced the closure of its web store in 2016 after two short years in Singapore, and citing a

[6] Singapore ranks top as the most conducive business and innovation environment, according to the World Economic Forum report (2015).
[7] Taobao established its regional hub in Singapore (2013)

transition of e-commerce strategy. The closure of its Southeast Asia marketplaces (in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore) was cited as part of a move from a B2C to C2C business model with a focus on m-commerce (2016). The Competition Commission of Singapore cautioned that Singapore's e-commerce market might converge to reflect the dominance of a small number of huge marketplaces, thereby stifling competition and innovation (Lim et al., 2015).

In summary, Singapore is positioned as one of the fastest growing and most promising, new e-commerce markets with ample room for future growth. The city-state offers a slew of initiatives and incentives, coupled with a conducive business environment for firms, both large and small, local and foreign, to establish and grow their businesses. Singapore's vibrant e-commerce market is therefore a fertile ground for detailed empirical investigation of the conceptual issues raised in the review of literature.

3.6 Summarising the Review of Literature

This section summarises the two-part review of literature that informed this study. Reviewing extant literature in two parts provided a logical flow that connects the theory to the context of this thesis. Chapter 2, the first part of the review, introduces the key theories from the IS and sociology disciplines that relates to information disclosure, as well as the online and offline contexts in which strategic information control are applied. The second part of the review, that is, this chapter sets the context for the study based on Singapore's small e-businesses in the online retail sector.

The two chapters therefore connect literature in multiple disciplines (including information system, marketing, sociology and communications), which are related to the central theme of impression management. The two-part review of literature engages not only the IS field, other disciplines are surveyed to bring together the collective knowledge surrounding the management of information in an online environment.

Table 6 presents a summary of the theoretical concepts surveyed in the literature review and demonstrates how these concepts are relevant to the context of the study.

Table 6: Summary of theoretical underpins relevant to the context of this thesis

Theoretical concepts	**Context for the thesis**
Dramaturgy theory, impression management (individual) (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Gardner & Martinko, 1988; Goffman, 1959)	There is drama in everyday social interactions between people. People are motivated to influence others to develop an impression or perception that they desire through the control of information. Strategic information control can be accomplished through the selective manipulation of information content and audience segregation.
Information transparency, information visibility strategy (Granados & Gupta, 2013; Granados, Gupta, & Kauffman, 2006; Granados et al., 2010; Granados, Gupta, & Kauffman, 2008; Grover & Kohli, 2013)	Competition in the contemporary e-commerce market entails strategically managing the transparency or visibility of information on the Internet.
Organisation impression management (Bolino et al., 2008; Elsbach, 1994; Elsbach et al., 1998; Mohamed et al., 1999)	Organisations, like individuals, are motivated to manage the public's impressions of them. Driven by challenging situations, organisations utilise remedial and anticipatory tactics to repair and protect their corporate image.
Retail store image (Chang & Tseng, 2013; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009; Yun & Good, 2007; Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004; Biswas & Biswas, 2004)	Store image significantly influences consumers' perception of the store and marketing activities are considered as efforts to manage customers' impressions of the store.

The review of literature is framed around three interrelated concepts – information, image and impression. This research attempts to adapt a theoretical approach beyond IS and marketing theories to analyse and explain the phenomenon of information visibility in B2C e-markets. Borrowing dramaturgy and the impression management perspective from sociology, the thesis applies the concepts of information control to analyse the study's findings and to explicate decision-making on managing information visibility on retail websites. The approach in the thesis is consistent with the notion that obtaining an integrated view of a retailer's use and protection of its information assets calls for an approach that makes information central to the inquiry process (Yadav & Pavlou, 2014).

Given the information challenges in e-markets, how do online retailers grapple with these issues to ensure e-business sustainability? This thesis argues that Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory can be adapted to explicate the ways firms manage information visibility to enhance the online store's image. Information is a key building block in dramaturgy, where an individual attempt to control the information conveyed to others through expressions *given* and *given off*, to influence the way impressions are formed of him. Expressions are *given* by using "verbal symbols or their substitutes which he uses admittedly and solely to convey information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols" (Goffman, 1959, p. 2). It is the expressions *given off*, which is the uncontrollable information that threatens the impression management process as it would "discredit, disrupt, or make useless the impression that ... [the individual] fosters" (Goffman, 1959, p. 141). Dramaturgy suggests that firms can present a more favourable image than they possess in reality because their audience do not have immediate or easy access to information that discredits the claims. The advantage of information asymmetry that firms enjoy over consumers constitutes of "many crucial facts [that] lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it" (Goffman, 1959, p. 1).

In his book "*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*", Goffman (1959, p. 136) offered a brief insight into a seller's attempt to impress his customers and ultimately persuading them into making a purchase:

> "If the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be found in. They will be forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses. The individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally *expresses* himself, and the others will in turn have to be *impressed* in some way by him." (1959, p. 136)

In his narrative, Goffman suggested that sellers need to promote their product or service by expressing themselves to impress their customers, and in turn their customers will be have to sufficiently impressed by them before they decide to buy. Building on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy, Prus (1989, p. 21) described the marketplace as a theatre in his book "*Pursuing Customers*":

> “The marketplace is a great theatre in the sense that there is much drama, suspense, and adventure. It is, further, an interactive theatre. Both buyers and sellers assume roles as tacticians and targets as the scenes unfold. It is an emergent theatre. The marketplace involves considerable planning, scripting, and orderliness, but it contains much ambiguity, and allows for much creativity, persuasion, and resistance.” (1989, p. 21)

As Prus contended, marketing and sales entail a plurality of activities, including the presentation of products for sale, the promotion of products, the provision of customer service, and so on. It is through the engagement in marketing and sales activities that merchants become mindful of the dramatic nature of their actions, argued Prus (1989). Characteristics of drama can be observed in the collective undertakings of the merchants, which includes persuasion, shaping of customers’ shopping behaviour and immersion in day-to-day interactions with customers that “are continually being constituted and reconstituted over time as the parties involved work out the facets of their lives in conjunction with one another” (Prus, 1989, p. 304).

Similarly, online shopping environments are designed to inform, persuade and entertain. Retail websites are the primary points of access and communication for potential buyers and the selling firm (Burt et al., 2007; Powell, Horvath, & Brandtner, 2016), but studies on the way retailers present themselves, are rare. Researchers have called for more attention to the study of organisation behaviour (including impression management behaviour) relating to organisation’s websites (Powell et al., 2016; Winter et al., 2003).

The research attempts to address these gaps mentioned in the review of literature:

- Research on impression management by organisations (Bolino et al., 2008) in online environments (Walther, 2011) using technhology (Bolino et al., 2016) and bearing a marketing perspective has been limited. Little is known about how organisation impression management comes into play as a means of marketing communications for retailers on websites.

- Studies have approached the measurement of store image from customers' perceptions but a firm's perspective on developing store image is lacking. Therefore, a gap lies in understanding how online retail images could be developed from the strategic control of information and impressions through a firm's perspective.

- Small businesses have all along face more challenges to survive compared to large enterprises (Winter et al., 2009), yet they receive relatively less research attention (Pett & Wolff, 2012). Further research may be beneficial to small retailers to assist them in harnessing their websites for impression management (Winter et al., 2003).

A Conceptual Model

The review of literature uncovered the lack of scholarly attention toward exploring impression management as a mechanism to assist small firms to create and maintain the desired store image during its interactions with customers. Informed by interdisciplinary literature (see Table 6), a model on the way retailer firms attempt to shape its store images to impress customers was conceptualized, as shown in Figure 6. By employing impression management tactics through the strategic control of information, impressions are fostered based on the expressions that are communicated using symbol sets. The notion that retailers' decisions about communications on the web involve trade-offs between information disclosure and concealment is the fundamental idea of the thesis. Further, the decision-making of strategic information control rests on the retailer's interpretations of situational encounters with customers. The proposed conceptualization explicitly located the information and impression management practices of small retailers who are situated in the B2C e-commerce context.

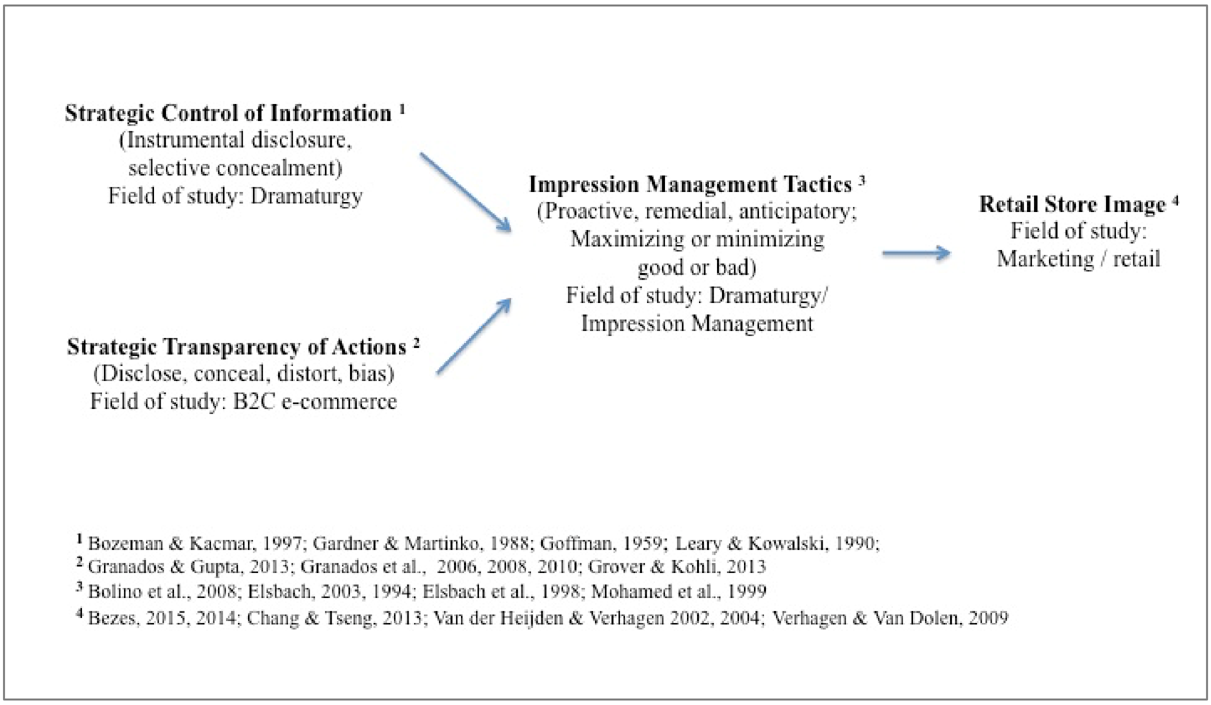

Figure 6: Conceptual framework for this thesis

3.7 Summary

This chapter introduces the contemporary information problems encountered by retail firms in the e-commerce industry and the counter-strategies proposed by IS researchers to vary the visibility or transparency of information made available to the public. In doing so, firms are constructing an impression they want their stakeholders to have of them. Next, the chapter proceeds to focus attention on small businesses, and provides an overview of the e-commerce landscape in Singapore, the country in which this study is based. The chapter identifies the gap as a lack of focus on impression management efforts by online retailers and the scarcity of studies on how they could navigate the characteristics of computer-mediated platform, which is distinctly different from the traditional retail environment.

Informed by the literature, the conceptual framework for this thesis outlined a model of how online retailers strategically managed information and impressions, leading to desired outcome of images portrayed to the public. This chapter also summarises the theoretical concepts informing the study and provides a grounding on which the research findings can be analysed and explained. The next chapter describes the research methodology and methods used to investigate the information practices of online retailers in Singapore and how it influences the extent of information visibility on retail websites.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 describes the design of the inquiry used to answer the research question regarding how retailers attempt to impress consumers by presenting desirable store images through the control of information on retail websites. The chapter is organized as follows: it first sets out to recapitulate the research problem, objectives and question. After describing the purpose of inquiry, the chapter explains the philosophical assumptions on which the study is grounded and justifies the methodological approach taken. Next, it details the data collection procedures and analysis processes used to produce the evidence required to address the research question. Finally, the chapter ends with ethical considerations and a summary of the methodological considerations.

The research examined a contemporary yet common issue faced by online retailers, that is, presenting the store's best front on the web to attract e-shoppers and ultimately driving up sales despite being constrained by limited resources. In the highly competitive e-market, a well-positioned website is often a baseline for strong online presence and as a fundamental form of marketing communication for retailers to reach out to consumers. As the old saying goes, "one never gets a second chance to make a first impression", and the same goes for web stores. The review of literature revealed that little has been explicitly investigated about impression presentation and management on retail websites.

The research objectives are to:

1. Ascertain the information management tactics employed in retail websites in Singapore, and
2. Identify the store images online retailers attempted to portray on their web stores.

To operationalise the research objectives, the research question is designed to gather insights from both retail websites and its owners and/or managers on the way information on the websites is managed and presented to impress upon consumers. The formulation of the research question was informed by the literature review presented in previous chapters.

In addressing the objectives of the study, the thesis poses the following research question:

> *How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store image through impression management on retail websites?*

4.2 Research Design

4.2.1 Decisions on Research Design

The design of this research demonstrated how the major parts of the inquiry work together to address the research question and is informed by Crotty's (1998) research design framework. The framework consists of interrelated levels of decisions on epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods. Adopting the framework ensures the soundness of the research as the framework provides a systematic justification of the decision taken at each step in the research process.

Crotty's (1998) framework illustrated the scaffolding process in which decisions on the core elements of the research process, namely epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods, are interrelated in a linear fashion. Epistemology, "the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), forms the foundation of the design framework. Theoretical perspectives, which represent "the philosophical stance informing the methodology" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), are selected on the basis of their grounding in epistemology. The methodology, which is the strategy or plan that justifies the selection of a method for the study, is then chosen based on the theoretical perspective. Finally specific methods, that is, "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), are identified from the chosen methodology. Each level of the research design is cascaded in such a way that it provides the basis for the next.

Following Crotty's (1998) framework, the study's assumptions for ontological, epistemological and methodological positions are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions for this study

Positions on Research Design	**Research Question:** *How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store image through impression management on retail websites?*
Ontology (What is the nature of reality?)	Social constructionism Each individual perceives and constructs different meanings about the information presented by their stores and therefore multiple realities exist.
Epistemology (How do we come to know the reality? What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched?)	Interpretivism The sharing of narratives about information and impression management tactics by the online retailers provides an insight into their information practices. The researcher gains an interpretive understanding from these narratives. The researcher would act as a listener, an observer and a guide to the research participant during the interview process.
Methodology (What is the strategy of inquiry?)	Qualitative, interpretive case study Collective cases
Methods (What techniques are used for data collection?)	1. Semi-structured interviews 2. Data gathering of web content
(What techniques are used for data analysis?)	1. Open, axial and selective coding 2. Content analysis

The subsequent sections elaborate each of the above positions in detail.

4.2.2 Philosophical Assumptions

Similar to other scholars, the researcher began the research project with certain assumptions about what and how she will learn during her inquiry. Such assumptions are embedded in the researchers' paradigms or worldviews about what knowledge is (i.e. ontology), how we came to know about that knowledge (i.e. epistemology) and the process of studying it (i.e. methodology) (Creswell, 2009). Paradigms are "patterns of beliefs and practices that regulate inquiry within a discipline by providing lenses, frames and processes through which investigation is accomplished" (Weaver and Olson, 2006, p.460).

Philosophical assumptions have a profound impact on research design decisions, and are the foundations on which the researcher selects the methodology and methods to employ for the investigation of the research questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The philosophical foundations of this thesis is explicitly articulated in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions as it informs how the researcher's paradigm shaped the approach towards the inquiry design. It also helps to introduce quality to the research process and enables the researcher to interpret the phenomenon in its natural, contextual setting (Cua & Garrett, 2008). Understanding the relationship between ontology and epistemology is tantamount to the researcher's comprehension of her own view of reality and the meaning of knowledge and its creation (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). This understanding is fundamental to the identification of a philosophical orientation, which falls into one of the two broad paradigms – positivism or constructivism.

This study's ontological position is social constructionism. Constructionism is rooted in the belief that no single universal reality exists. Based on an ontological position of relativism, the constructivist searches for the multiple realities that exist in people's minds and is open to interpretations gathered from participants in an inquiry. A relativist ontological perspective must be accompanied by a subjectivist epistemology, as the only way to access the realities locked up in the minds of respondents is through interaction with them (Guba, 1990). The premise of the research is that the decision for impression management on retail websites is made by storeowners and thus, is socially constructed. Social constructionism is the view that "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 43) and that "all meaningful reality […] is socially constructed" (p. 55).

On the other hand, positivism presents an opposing view to constructionism. A positivism orientation is deemed unsuitable for this inquiry as it contradicts the researcher's belief in the existence of multiple perspectives. The basic beliefs of positivism is that an objective reality exists out there, waiting to be discovered through scientific observation (Gray, 2013). Based on realist ontology, the positivist researcher sets out to discover that reality and how it works. The knowledge is then generalised in the form of cause-effect laws, thereby allowing the positivist to predict natural phenomena and to control future occurrences. A realist ontological perspective must be accompanied by an objectivist epistemology, in which the positivist inquirer adopts a distant position that does not involve interactions with the subjects under study (Guba, 1990). Given the above contradictions with the nature of this study, a positivist perspective is therefore deemed inappropriate.

The epistemological position of this study is interpretivism. This research adopts an interpretive paradigm, due to the researcher's belief that reality is socially constructed by people who assign meanings to the phenomenon under study (H. K. Klein & Myers, 1999; Walsham, 1995). The research seeks knowledge from online retailing situations from which impression management occurs, and the knowledge represents the interpretive understanding of the retail storeowners. Interpretivism is a paradigm grounded on a "life-world ontology, which argues that all observation is theory- and value-laden" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 69). The interpretivist position is based on humans' interpretation, that is, self-understanding of the social world, which is a subjective truth (Leitch et al. 2010).

4.2.3 Justification for a Qualitative Approach

Given the study's epistemological stance is social constructionism, a qualitative inquiry is appropriate (Flick, 2014). Qualitative research is a process whereby a study investigates a social issue in its natural setting and delivers a rich description and explanation of the complex phenomenon (Creswell, 2013b; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Four key considerations led to the selection of a qualitative approach for the study. First, the exploratory nature of the research problem merits a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2013b). An exploration into the research topic is needed because the adoption of impression management strategies by retail websites has not been previously examined in depth. When little information is available (Creswell, 2013b) and the phenomenon is not well understood, a qualitative strategy is appropriate (Eisenhardt, 1989). Second, a deep understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon can only be established from an *emic* perspective, that is, through the lens of research participants to understand their perceptions of social reality. The emic approach deals with the nature of the knowledge in terms of the conceptual schemes (such as personal accounts and descriptions) regarded as meaningful by the participants (Willis, 2007). A qualitative perspective enables the researcher to talk directly with the participants and delve into their inner experience to determine how they form meanings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008a). Third, the e-commerce *context* in which the study participants (i.e. online retailers) address the research problem is an important aspect (Creswell, 2013b). Meanings are situated within an e-commerce context in the study, amid specific social, cultural, political, technological and other contextual factors. The researcher then seeks to understand the *contextual* influences on the individual's behaviour (Schram, 2006). Given the above considerations, a qualitative approach is therefore most appropriate for the study.

4.3 Research Methodology: Qualitative Case Study

4.3.1 Justification for using the Case Study Methodology

The methodology employed in this research is a case study approach. The definition of the term "case study" was attempted by several scholars, among which Yin and Stake are commonly cited separately as the methodological authorities and are most relevant to this study. Yin (2009, p. 14) defined case study as "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident". For Stake (1988, p. 258), a case study is "a study of the bounded system, emphasizing unity and wholeness of the system, but confining the attention only to those aspects that are relevant to the research problem at the time and unity of the system". This study adopts Yin's (1989) definition. Impression management on websites is a contemporary phenomenon in the context of e-commerce and the case investigated was the online retailers' adoption. Two sources of evidence were used – web content of the retail stores and interviews with online retailers and consumers.

Three considerations leading to the decision to use a case study methodology is discussed. First, the nature of the research question is one that required deeper investigation as a "how" question is being asked (Yin, 2009). Case study methodology bears a distinct advantage when used in situations where "*how*" questions are asked, such as in this study (that is, "*How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store images through impression management on retail websites?*"). Second, when the degree of control over participants' behaviour is low, case study proves to be useful (Yin, 2009). The researcher cannot manipulate the attitude and behaviour of online retailer, that is, their information practices. Third, the extent of focus on contemporary events is a factor that determines if case study is suitable. As a tool for preliminary exploration, case study is "particularly well suited to new research areas for which existing theory seems inadequate" (Eisenhardt, 1989). The current body of literature on online impression management is still nascent and does not adequately explain the contemporary phenomenon in an online retailing context. Since the phenomenon cannot be separated from the context in which they occur, the case has to be studied in its naturalistic setting, and not in laboratory experiment set-ups. In summary, a qualitative case study approach is deemed appropriate for this study because "a how or why question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (Yin, 2009, p. 13).

Another reason for employing case research is its strength in presenting reality, that is, cases are grounded on real-life situations which provide the justification for persuasive argument (Siggelkow, 2007). A case study can provide powerful insights into the real-world complexities of a business decision-making process, such as an information disclosure decision for managing impressions. Furthermore, a case study allows the researcher to "engage with and report the complexity of social activity to represent the meaning that individual actors bring to those settings" (Stark & Torrance, 2005, p. 33). In this research, case study is useful for understanding how online retailers employ impression management tactics on their websites as part of their marketing communication outreach to consumers. Furthermore, a qualitative case study can accommodate unexpected situations when working with people in their natural settings (Merriam, 1998). The researcher can leverage on the strength of case study as a research instrument to investigate a complex social phenomenon involving multiple variables in its natural setting within a particular context (Merriam, 1998).

Case study research is widely regarded as the most common qualitative method in IS (Myers 1997) while interpretivism became an established paradigm within the IS community in recent years (Walsham, 2006). The nature of this research is qualitative, and hence this is a qualitative case study, that is, an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam, 1998, p. 27). Interpretive case research, in particular, has also gained recognition and acceptance as a research methodology (Keutel, Michalik, & Richter, 2014), and therefore this study chooses to adopt an interpretive case design.

4.3.2 Case Study Design and Quality Issues

Although case study may be a useful tool to undertake qualitative inquiry, practical difficulties still exist in its execution (Yin, 2009). The challenges include the scarcity of suitable case study sites, the time-consuming data collection process, difficulty of analysing the huge amount of data collected, and establishing the validity of the study findings. Critics have argued that case studies lack rigor, objectivity and generalizability as compared to other research methods (Yin, 2009). Rigor in a qualitative study is derived from the triangulation of data, the interactions between the researcher and participants, and the interpretations of the thick, rich descriptions generated from the data, argued Merriam (2009).

Addressing the criticisms on case study for the lack of rigor, this exploratory study used the following case study tactics recommended by Yin (2009) to satisfy the test criteria for quality in case research design:

1. Construct validity – multiple sources of evidence (i.e. interviews and web content) were used and the chain of events was documented (see Appendix 3).
2. External validity - the use of replication logic to demonstrate that the findings of one case can be replicated to another, that is, analytical generalization.
3. Reliability - the procedures used in a case were documented using a case study database so that another researcher could replicate the study. The case study database is not intended for publication (Yin, 2012) but is available upon request.

Another common criticism of case studies relates to its lack of scientific generalizations. Unlike statistical generalization where the results of a sample can be generalised to the whole population, the findings of this case study are generalised to theoretical propositions (Yin, 2009) since the purpose is to understand and explain social situations.

One of the challenges of conducting a case study is the difficulty of developing a research design (Yin, 2009). A research design can be thought of as a logical plan from the start of the research to the end, or a "blueprint" that deals with the research questions, relevant data, data is to be collected and data analysis (Philliber, Schwab, & Samsloss, 1980). The research design for this case study research encompassed the logic of design, data collection and analysis techniques (Yin, 2009). In overcoming this challenge, this study adopted five key components highlighted by Yin (2009): the research question, the research purpose, the unit(s) of analysis, the logic that connects the data to the propositions (i.e. analytical techniques), and the criteria for interpreting the findings. The five components of this inquiry are identified as follows. The research question in this study is: "*How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store image through impression management on retail websites?*" The key research purpose is to understand the decisions of online retailers on rationalizing the use of impression management strategies on retail websites. The unit of analysis is the case. Punch (2014) suggested that a case might be a small group or an organisation. The case in this study is an online retail store. The analysis method to address the last two components is described in a later section (Data Collection and Analysis Methods) of this chapter.

Following Yin (2009)'s argument, this study has put in place a case study protocol (see Appendix 3). Having a case study protocol not only keeps the researcher focused on the topic of study, by preparing it pushes one to anticipate problems well in advance. The study followed a "rigorous methodological path" with "dedication to formal and explicit procedures" as advocated by Yin (2009, p. 3). Adopting an interpretivist approach to case studies, nevertheless, allows flexibility in revising study designs to cater for the needs of a specific research situation during the conduct of the study (H. K. Klein & Myers, 1999; Walsham, 2006). The researcher is therefore mindfully, and not blindly following a standardized case study blueprint (Keutel et al., 2014).

The purpose of this research is to examine the phenomenon of impression management within an online community of retailers with the use of several cases, as in multiple or collective case studies. The study of more than one case, with the cases sharing common characteristics, is what Stake (1994) defined as a collective case study. Collective or multiple case studies holds an advantage over a single case as the former produces more compelling findings and the overall design is more robust (Blumberg et al., 2008; Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Figure 7 illustrates the collective case approach used in this study.

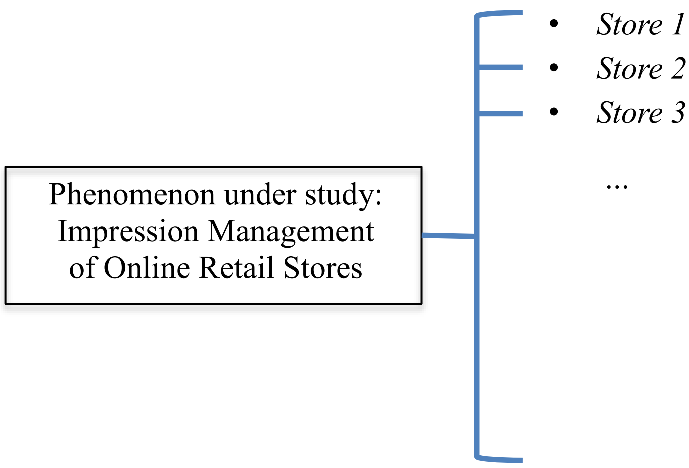

Figure 7: Collective, embedded case approach

4.3.3 Sampling and Case Selection

Sampling concerns the principles and procedures used in the identification and selection of data sources (J. Mason, 2002). Cases and participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling so as to select subjects who fit the study's purpose. Purposive sampling, a type of non-random technique using a set of predetermined criteria, is suitable as it narrows the selection of participants with characteristics relevant to the research objective (Blumberg et al., 2008). During purposive sampling, participants are selected based on similar knowledge or experiences of the specific phenomenon being explored (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009). A set of selection criteria for shortlisting the cases and participants were established at the outset to ensure the selected cases and participants are information-rich.

The selection of cases in this study is guided by replication logic and serves to predict similar results, that is, a literal replication (Yin, 2009). The key idea behind replication logic is that the same phenomenon is expected to occur under the same circumstances or different phenomenon when circumstances change (Blumberg et al., 2008). For literal replication, the selected cases are from the same country (Singapore), same industry (B2C e-commerce) and have similar firm size (small e-businesses), thus enabling the identification of common practices that arise from within similar firm size, industry and country. In this study, selected cases are 'most similar' across their key attributes (Seawright & Gerring, 2008), that is, country, industry, and firm size.

The selection criteria for the online store (i.e. case) are as follows. First, the online stores selected for this study were based in Singapore. Singapore is selected as the research context due to its thriving e-commerce industry (ChannelNewsAsia, 2013a) and strong growth projections over the upcoming years (Mediabuzz, 2011). Second, the online stores operate in the B2C sector. The phenomenon of online impression management is not well understood in the B2C industry when compared to the wider body of literature on supply chain management or business-to-business (B2B) industry. The online stores must belong to the consumer retail business selling tangible consumer goods that fits the definition of merchandise (Hortaçsu & Syverson, 2015). According to Euromonitor's classification, the core product sectors in Singapore's Internet retailing fall into these categories – apparel/fashion goods, furniture/home furnishings/housewares, DIY/hardware goods, household appliances/consumer electronics, household cleaning products, cosmetics/toiletries, food/beverages, leisure goods (including media products, toys and games), and others (including jewellery, gift items, florist and so on) (Euromonitor, 2003).

Third, small e-businesses are the target of this study, and the focus is on small e-business as a way of 'giving voice' (Merriam, 2009) to the business owners-managers as they represent an under-researched group within the largest sector of the economy (Longenecker et al., 2013). The interpretive approach used in this study provides an opportunity for 'the voice', concerns and practices of these research participants to be heard (Weaver & Olson, 2006).

Two types of participants are recruited for this study – retailers and consumers. The selection criteria for retailer participants are as follows. First, the role of the retailer participant is the owner-manager of the online stores in Singapore. Owner-managers are the decision-makers of the firm and thus they will be in the best position to explain the rationale of the way they manage the public's impressions of the e-business. Second, the retailer participants had operated their online stores for at least six months, so as to ensure sufficient experience in managing a retail e-business compared to nascent new entrants. The retailer participants were sourced from Google searches, online store directories (e.g. LittleGreenDot.com), e-marketplaces (e.g. Qoo10, Etsy, Rakuten etc), and through a personal network of friends. The selection criteria for consumer participant comprises of age and shopping experience. Consumer participants were above 21 years old and have shopped online at least once during the past twelve months.

The study was conducted based on a purposive sampling of twenty-two participants. This size fell within the range of participant numbers recommended by scholars for qualitative research. Bertaux (1981, p. 35) recommended fifteen as the smallest acceptable sample for all types of qualitative studies. Kuzel (1992, p. 41) suggested twelve to twenty while Charmaz (2006, p. 114) suggested twenty-five interviews as being adequate for small projects. Green and Thorogood (2009), among other qualitative researchers, argued that very few new findings could be uncovered after twenty interviews. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that data saturation occurred within the first twelve interviews in their study of sixty participants and suggested a minimum sample size of twelve for qualitative studies with the objective to understand common perceptions and experiences within a high homogeneity group. Due to the duration of the study, it is not practical to include a large population of online retailers in Singapore.

As soon as the data analysis reached theoretical saturation with the stated number of participants, the researcher decided to stop gathering data. Scholars suggested to discontinue gathering data when themes or categories reach saturation, that is, no new theoretical insights, nor new properties of core theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006, p. 113). Furthermore, when "no new properties of the pattern emerge" (Glaser, 2001, p. 191), or when no further issues pertaining to a category of data surface (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), or "only tiny increments of new information" is produced compared to the huge effort in obtaining them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 350). Theoretically, saturation is a convincing concept but empirically, its weakness lies in the limited time devoted to field work, in which research projects such as PhD studies, cannot afford the luxury to wait for saturation to occur (Mason, 2010).

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

This section describes the methods to collect and analyse data to derive findings that answer the research questions. Yin (2009) advocates three principles to be followed during data collection so as to prepare data worthy of further analysis. The use of multiple sources of evidence is the first. This study relied on two sources of data - interviews and content of retail stores' webpages (see Table 8). A single source of evidence was deemed insufficient for case studies. Using multiple sources of evidence facilitates the process of data triangulation and leads to converging lines of inquiry (Patton, 1987). Data triangulation also addresses the potential problem of construct validity, as there are multiple measures of the same phenomenon.

Table 8: Data sources and their purposes

Data Sources	Purpose
Interviews with retailer participants	To understand how retailer handles information on their website
Interviews with consumer participants	To gather consumers' reactions towards the information presented on retail websites
Content of retail websites	To understand how information is presented on retail websites

The second principle of case study data collection is to create a case study database to organise and document the data collected. The database is an inventory of the two sources of data collected and analysed. The information in the case study database represented an audit trail of data collection and analysis activities during the study. Since the audit trail systematically documented what the researcher did, how the researcher did it and how the researcher arrived at the interpretations, it served as an account for readers to follow the logic of the inferences and confirm the grounding of the findings in the data (Bowen, 2009). Details of the database can be found in Appendix 3. The third principle is to maintain a chain of evidence that helps in increasing the reliability of the data. The detailed description of the data collection and analysis processes in this and the next section fulfilled the third principle. Overall the key objectives were to ensure evidence presented in the thesis is the same as that is collected during the data collection process, and that no original evidence is lost (Yin, 2009).

The subsequent sub-sections detailed the collection and analysis process of the interviews, followed by web content.

4.4.1 Profile of Retailer Participants and their Stores

Retailer participants who are owners of the online stores were surveyed in this study (see Table 9). Their real names were replaced with their initials (e.g. AC) to preserve their identity. Except for 5 male entrepreneurs, the rest of the retailers are females.

Half of the stores surveyed fall into the "pure clicks" (Toufaily, Souiden, & Ladhari, 2013) or "pure play" (Ghazali, Nguyen, Mutum, & Mohd-Any, 2016) category, that is, they operate purely online without a physical retail presence. The rest of the stores that participated in this study are bricks-and-clicks with both online and offline retail stores. Bricks-and-clicks (Ghazali et al., 2016) stores are often interchangeably referred to as clicks-and-bricks (Toufaily et al., 2013) or click-and-mortar (Powell, Horvath, & Brandtner; Steinfield, Bouwman, & Adelaar, 2002) in the existing literature. Several of the stores circumvent the lack of a retail outlet by having showrooms that operate by appointment only or by placing their products for sale at stockists. Besides owning a dedicated website, a few of the online stores have set up e-shops in online marketplaces (for example, Carousell, Big Cartel and Qoo10).

These online stores were considered as small businesses. About a quarter were sole proprietors. The rest employed a small number of staff, usually one to three part-timers to assist in handling logistics work and the day-to-day operations. The online stores sell tangible products ranging from apparel, books, hobby craft, food/beverage, skincare products, pet care products, household (such as tableware) and lifestyle items (such as eldercare products and stationery). See Appendix 14 for the case descriptions for each of the stores.

4.4.2 Collection of Interview Data

Interviews remain a predominant data source for interpretive case studies (Keutel et al., 2014). This study used in-depth semi-structured interviewing as the collection method for the primary data source to answer the following research question: *"How do under-resourced online retailers shape their store image through impression management on retail websites?"*

Table 9: Summary of online stores and retailer participants

Retailer	Gender	Type of store	Company size	Key product
1. AC	Male	Pure clicks	2 co-founders	Hobby craft
2. MT	female	Pure clicks	2 co-founders	Hobby craft
3. AL	Female	Pure clicks	Under 5 employees	Grocery/Skincare
4. AS	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Maternity apparel
5. BL	Female	Pure clicks	Under 5 employees	Books
6. DC	Male	Bricks-and-clicks	5 employees	Pet care
7. DI	Female	Pure clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Hobby craft
8. ES	Female	Pure clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Books
9. GT	Female	Bricks-and clicks	Under 5 employees	Grocery
10. IS	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Skincare
11. JE	Female	Pure clicks	Under 5 employees	Skincare
12. JH	Female	Pure clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Hobby craft
13. LL	Male	Bricks-and-clicks	2 co-founders	Eyewear
14. MD	Female	Pure clicks	Under 5 employees	Bags
15. MR	Female	Pure clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Books
16. NL	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Housewares
17. PC	Male	Pure clicks	Under 5 employees	Books
18. PT	Male	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Books
19. PL	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Nursing apparel
20. RH	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	1 (sole proprietor)	Skincare
21. SJ	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Lifestyle items
22. VK	Female	Bricks-and-clicks	Under 5 employees	Eldercare

Semi-structured interviewing is chosen because it provides structure to ensure comparability across different cases in multiple case study (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The face-to-face interviews were designed to be semi-structured in a way that requires the participants to answer a list of pre-planned questions but allowing flexibility to divert from the list depending on the dialog. The merit of a semi-structured approach is that it gives flexibility to both the researcher and the participants. The interviewer can vary the order of the questions asked, change the way the questions are asked, or ask new questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, the researcher can probe questions that asked: "*Why?*" or "*Why not?*" Such flexibility facilitates the researcher to gain insights into how the participants interpret the situation, which is the central idea of an interpretive study. The participants, on the other hand, were given an opportunity to discuss new sub-topics that are relevant and yet not thought of by the researcher. At the end of the session, the participants were invited to give his/her views openly on related topics not covered during the interview. Since the researcher prefers rich, detailed data, the interviewees are encouraged to reveal other relevant information of interest to the interviewees that may provide further insight to the research topic. Interviewees were thus allowed to express their opinions and personal experiences freely. The semi-structured approach and the flexibility of qualitative interviewing is well-suited to exploratory studies and the exploration of a topic (Blumberg et al., 2008).

Adequate preparation for the interview is important and as such, an interview guide, as part of the case study protocol, was prepared. The interview guide outlined the procedures for conducting the interviews. It contained a list of questions and served as a working manual to be used during the actual sessions with the participants. The interview guide can be found in the Appendix 4. A list of twenty-six questions was prepared for the interviews with retailer participants (see Appendix 5). The retailer participants were asked to relate their real-world experience as real life scenarios are more salient than vignettes or those that are simulated (McMahon & Harvey, 2007). The question list was designed to comprise of a variety of different question types, such as direct, indirect, and probing (Blumberg et al., 2008). Direct questions ask participants about their views or feelings: *"How do you overcome these challenges and difficulties?"* Indirect questions ask about the other people, and not about the participant, for example: *"What do you think are the concerns of consumers when it comes to online shopping?"* Probing questions ask the participants for elaboration or clarification, for example: *"What other challenges or difficult decisions do you face operating an online store?"* Structured and interpreting question types are posed to the participants as and when necessary during the interview. Structuring questions are asked to ensure the participant has nothing more to add on to the sub-topic before moving on to another, for example: *"Is there anything else you would like to add, or else, shall we move on to the next question?"* Interpreting questions asked for confirmation whether the researcher has understood the participant correctly. Using reflective active listening technique, an example of a question is: *"Am I right to say that..?"*

The conduct of the fieldwork is described as follows. The researcher first approached the online stores through their contacts such as an email address listed on their websites or a social media network account (for example, Facebook). A friendly, introductory message along with a softcopy of the researcher's name card, participant information and consent forms were attached. A copy of the interview question list was provided to participants upon request. More than 70 online stores were contacted in August 2014 and 15 participants eventually agreed to be interviewed. A second round of interviews was conducted in May 2016 to collect more data. More than 30 stores were contacted and 7 storeowners agreed to participate. This results in a total of 20% participation rate. Two rounds of data collection provided the opportunity to enlarge the sample and refine the interview questions. All were face-to-face interviews except for two participants who requested to be interviewed via telephone. When scheduling the face-to-face interviews, the participants were given the flexibility of choice of location, date and time. Logistical considerations include the convenience of venue to participant (for example, at the participant's office), privacy of the venue (a private office versus a public café) and the noise level at the venue to ensure good recording quality (a quiet meeting room versus a noisy café) (Merriam, 2009).

On the day of the interview, the researcher utilized the interview guide during the process of conducting the interview. Every participant interviewed was briefed about the objectives of the research, the format and duration of the interview as well as the confidentiality provisions. The researcher also asked for permission to audio-record the conversation prior to the interviews. By the end of the sessions, all participants signed and returned the consent forms to the researcher. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes to 1.5 hours. When conducting the interviews, the researcher adopted a non-participant observer approach, that is, the primary role of a researcher is an *active listener* during the interview process (Blumberg et al., 2008), that is, listening most of the time with minimum interruption and asking questions only when appropriate.

To produce full and accurate text for subsequent analysis from interviews, the researcher recorded the dialog and transcribed them. Recording ensures that the words of the participants are preserved and their original thoughts embodied in the words are not lost through the paraphrasing of the researcher (Seidman, 2006). Recording also offered the benefits of allowing both the researcher and participants to return to the recorded conversations to verify for accuracy. Transcribing interview recordings can be extremely time-consuming while professional transcription services can be costly. The researcher undertook the transcription of one 60-minutes to better appreciate the transcription process. Undergraduate students were hired to transcribe the remaining recordings and were given instructions to follow while transcribing. Every transcript was proofread and verified by the researcher while listening to the recorded interviews to ensure a high degree of accuracy was achieved. Although the interviews were conducted in English, the participants occasionally spoke a few words of Mandarin. The non-English words were still recorded in the transcript and were eventually translated to English. Data analysis was carried out using the English transcripts.

4.4.3 Collection and Analysis of Web Content Data

The web content data collection and analysis proceeded as follows. The first step involved determining the information categories on retail websites by surveying twenty-one online shopping websites owned/managed by the retailer participants. The researcher traversed each of the websites using a top-down approach, starting from the homepage's headings, sub-headings, and its sitemap where available. The categorical information gathered was then organized according to their granularity. For example, headings were classified as main categories, sub-heading as sub-categories and other details as components. Thereafter the researcher attempted to eliminate duplicates, combine, re-group, re-name and shift between categories and sub-categories so as to ensure maximum exclusivity (R. Weber, 1990) in all categories. The resultant list of information categories is documented in Table 8.

The second step involved the comparison of the resultant list with constructs in e-commerce literature, such as B2C (Granados & Gupta, 2013) and B2B (Zhu, 2002) studies. Upon comparison, the researcher found several similarities (see Table 8). Three information categories, seller/store, social media links and web design did not appear in the stated studies but are supported in other studies. Based on the principle of satisficing, the list of information categories was deemed sufficient to meet the needs of this study without engaging in an exhaustive search. Therefore, in the third step, the researcher proceeded to use this set of information categories for the collection of web content data. An example of data collected for a web store is illustrated in Appendix 7. The last step was to examine each information category for patterns across cases.

The intent for the collection of web content data was to analyse the way information is disclosed and presented on the websites, which is instrumental to giving off impressions. The findings from the web content collection were corroborated with those from the interview data. Content analysis is an appropriate method to use in this study because it makes "replicable and valid references from data to their contexts" (Krippendorff, 2013, p. 24). Defined as "a systematic coding and categorising approach", content analysis allows the researcher "to unobtrusively explore large amounts of textual information to ascertain the trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships and the structures and discourses of communication" (Grbich, 2007, p. 112). The process of analysing content involved "the simultaneous coding of raw data and the construction of categories that capture relevant characteristics of the document's content" (Merriam, 2009, p. 205).

Krippendorff (2013) offers a prescriptive guide to the design of content analytic research, and the guide was adopted. The key conceptual components in the design are texts, research question, context, analytical construct, inferences and validating evidence. First, a body of text is the data that is available to the researcher. In this case, the texts are the data that can be found on retail websites. Second, the research question needs to be taken into consideration as it provides the empirical grounding for the content analyst. Third, the context represents the conceptual environment of the texts, and in this case, the study is situated in an online retail context. The significance of the context is that texts can only become meaningful interpretations in the context they are used. Fourth, analytical constructs are used to operationalise the researcher's knowledge about the context. In this study the analytical constructs took the form of major information categories that appears on retail websites (see Table 10). Fifth, the nature of the content analysis process is inferential, as the researcher attempts to draw inferences from the web content. Finally, content analysis allows empirical validation.

4.4.4 Iterations of Data Analysis

The goal of data analysis is to interpret or make sense out of the raw data so as to find answers to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). The analysis process involved several iterations using the constant comparative method to group similar data together, identify patterns among the data groups, and compare generated categories with each other and with existing literature. Basing the analysis on an inductive approach ensures the themes emerge out of the data (Patton, 2002).

The initial iterations of the analysis focused on examining the web content data to find patterns of information manipulation using the strategic actions defined by Granados et al.'s (2010) B2C transparency strategy framework. Thereafter data from the interviews with retailers was also examined for similar patterns. As a result, four actions and seven information tactics were identified from the analyses. The initial scope of analysis also involved the motivation driving online retailers to manager their stores' image, and looked at the participant responses to questions on overall business objectives, reasons for setting up the store and future directions for the store.

The middle iterations consisted of scrutinizing the earlier patterns as well as referring back to the interviews. The second round of analysis resulted in the identification of nine impression management tactics, which were derived from information tactics. After repeatedly going back and forth on the data several times, a typology of four store images eventually emerged from the nine impression management tactics.

During the later iterations, it became apparent to the researcher that two different sets of images were projected. This led the researcher to identify two primary facets: persuasive and protective, from each set of images. Upon further examination of the web content data, the researcher found that online stores differ in the number of images portrayed. Depending on the extent of store images portrayed, stores can be broadly classified as exhibiting two types of web facades – minimalist or impressionist.

4.4.5 Constant Comparison and Interpretation of Data

The interview data were analysed using open, axial and selective coding procedures. These coding procedures were chosen due to its systematic approach towards data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). During open coding, the researcher adopts an open mind to any possibilities that might come out of the data as it is segmented. A segment of data represents a unit of meaningful data that can be a potential answer or part of an answer to the research question (Merriam, 2009). This thesis treats a unit of data as a code, which is defined as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute" to a portion of text (Saldana, 2009). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a code has the characteristics of both being heuristic and independent, that is, it reveals information relevant to the inquiry and can be interpreted by itself without additional information. The process of open coding is thus considered descriptive as it involves marking bits or chunks of texts as relevant material for the inquiry. Besides descriptive labels, the researcher also assigned *in vivo* codes, which are based on the exact words of the participants as open codes.

Coding was done manually, that is using pen and paper, on hardcopies of interview transcripts. Open codes were written and/or highlighted in different colours on the left and right margins of the paper. The paragraph or phrases corresponding to the codes were marked with brackets. Open codes were subsequently transferred to a fresh piece of paper, and then compared with one another during axial coding. The comparison was again aided with colour highlights. This process was repeated with emerging categories and themes during selective coding.

Upon completing the open coding process, several similar codes exist in the data, thus forming repetitive patterns. The next step was to group the "recurring regularities or patterns" (Merriam, 2009, p. 180) into categories, also known as axial coding or analytical coding. Axial coding involved "a set of procedures whereby data are put back together in new ways after open coding, by making conditions, context, action/interactional strategies, and consequences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). The data was "segregated, grouped, regrouped and relinked to consolidate meaning and explanation" (Grbich, 2007, p. 21) and from which categories emerge. Categories are the conceptual elements that span across several codes and are abstracted from the data (Merriam, 2009). During axial coding, categories were either renamed or regrouped by sub-dividing or subsuming under other categories (Dey, 1993). The revision and refining of categories continued throughout the coding process. Categories eventually emerged from the codes, and categories are one level higher in abstraction than the codes.

The coding process apparently involved the judgment call of the researcher and was based on heuristics without specific formulas for the researcher to follow (Saldana, 2009). The researcher relied on several guidelines for developing thematic categories. Three guidelines recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1981) were used to select categories. First, the high frequency of a code appearing in the data or an issue being mentioned by the participants indicates the importance of a category. Second, the participant may identify and isolate an important category. Third, unique categories should be considered. Further, the five crtieria suggested by Merriam (2009) were also considered where applicable. First, the categories should answer the research question. Second, categories need to be sensitizing, that is, being exact in capturing the meaning of the data. Third, categories should be exhaustive to encompass all relevant data. Fourth, categories have to be mutually exclusive such that a code should not belong to more than one category. Finally, categories should demonstrate conceptual congruence, that is, categories within the same level should be grouped at the same level of abstraction. As for the final number of categories, the data analysis concluded with six themes (see section 4.4.5, Table 10), which is congruent with Creswell's (2007) recommendation of 5 or 6.

After all categories were determined, the researcher proceeded to formulate relationships between the categories. This step is selective coding, that is, "the selection of a core category, relate it to other categories, integrate and refine the categories into theoretical constructions" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 747). The theoretical constructs are the concepts or themes that are one level higher up than categories (Richards & Morse, 2007). In essence, the process of constant comparison in open, axial and selective coding involves comparing incidents to other incidents, comparing emerging concepts to more incidents, and finally comparing emerging concepts with each other (Holton, 2007).

During the constant comparison of codes, the researcher classified the emerged concepts using an adapted version of Strauss and Corbin (1998)'s coding paradigm. The paradigm model facilitates the establishment of relations between the phenomenon, context/conditions, strategies and consequences. The phenomenon identified in this inquiry is the behaviour of online retailers, that is, the projection of store images. Conditions may encourage or limit the possibilities of the occurrence of the phenomenon, and are identified as the store owner's motivation in running the e-business. Strategies are goal-oriented in that they are performed for specific purposes. Four strategic actions, six information tactics and nine impression management tactics were classified under strategies. The execution of strategies leads to consequences, which is the web façade of retail stores. Table 10 presents a summary of the themes and categories that emerged from the data analysis.

To show the generation of open codes from the interview data, and how they evolved into axial codes and the final selective code, visual integrative diagrams are used for this purpose (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Appendices A8 to A9 depict examples of the trail showing the generation of the themes "determining entrepreneurial motivation" and "deriving information tactics". Appendices A10 to A13 show examples of data triangulation between interview and web content data that generated the theme "developing impression management tactics".

Table 10: Comparison of information categories across B2C and business-to-business (B2B) studies

Information Categories	Description	Similar constructs in other studies
Product	Products offered by the store	Product Granados et al. (2010) Information (e.g. product information, product review, product update) Zhu and Kraemer (2002)
Shipping	Shipping or delivery options	Process Granados et al. (2010)
Payment	e-payment options	Process Granados et al. (2010)
Store policy	Includes Terms and Conditions, Conditions of Use or Terms of Sales	Process Granados et al. (2010) Transaction (e.g. return) Zhu and Kraemer (2002)
Privacy policy	Policy regarding consumer privacy	Process Granados et al. (2010)
Seller / Store	Information about the store and/or founders, and the means of contacting the store, e.g. email address, phone number	
Web store functionality	Includes shopping cart, search, customer account management, newsletter or mailing list, language option	Information (e.g. search capability) Transaction (e.g. buy capability, online order tracking, account management, security) Interaction (e.g. customer registration, real-time support) Zhu and Kraemer (2002)
Social media links	Links to social networks, e.g. Facebook, Twitter	
Web design	The web atmospherics aspects of the website, e.g. layout, use of colours, use of images	

Table 11: Summary of themes and categories for the study

Classification	**Theme**	**Category**
Condition	Determining entrepreneurial motivation	1. Sideline business 2. Extension of core business 3. Bigger profit margin 4. Attitude towards business growth
Strategies	Applying strategic actions on information elements	1. Reveal 2. Conceal 3. Selectively disclose 4. Dramatise
Strategies	Deriving information tactics	1. Extensive elaboration 2. Visual amplification 3. Language exaggeration 4. Figurative reinterpretation 5. Selective disclosure 6. Complete omission
Strategies	Developing impression management tactics	1. Emphasise/de-emphasise quality 2. Emulate large retailers 3. Strategically disclose seller identity 4. Draw attention to online social relationships 5. Proclaim commitment to privacy promises 6. Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment 7. Appeal to institutional trust 8. Transfer agency 9. Appear bureaucratic
Phenomena	Projecting store images	1. Reputable 2. Legitimate 3. Trustworthy 4. Assertive
Consequence	Presenting a web façade	1. Minimalist 2. Impressionist

4.4.6 Supporting Data from Consumers

The rationale for collecting additional data from consumer participants is to corroborate with the findings that emerge from the ongoing analysis. The themes that emerged suggest retailers employ a set of impression management tactics to project desired store images. Data from consumers served to compare, contrast and confirm the findings on the generation of impression management tactics and the subsequent portrayal of store images.

The survey questions for consumers comprised of nine parts (see Appendix 6). Each part corresponded to an impression management tactic, which is one of the themes that emerged during the data analysis. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used to recruit consumer participants. Purposive sampling ensures only consumer participants who fulfilled the study criteria are selected. Convenience sampling facilitates the researcher to locate those respondents who have experienced the phenomenon and are readily available to participate in the study (Morse, 2007).

The conduct of the interviews with consumer participants took place after completing the analyses of retailer interviews and web content in December 2016. The researcher recruited from a personal network and approached sixteen potential participants. Each consumer participant is screened for his/her experiences in online shopping during the past twelve months. Ten individuals responded to the survey, of which five were interviewed and the remaining participants provided written answers.

Consumer participants recruited for this study are Singapore residents aged above 21 years old. All of them are experienced online shoppers and had made at least one online purchase in the past twelve months. Similar to the naming conventions used on retailer participants, the real names of consumer participants were replaced with their initials (e.g. AF) to preserve their identity (see Table 12).

Consumer participants granted their consent to participate in this research by signing the consent form. Permission was also verbally obtained from the consumer participants to audio-record the conversations. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for further analysis. The findings from the analysis of consumer interviews are presented together with the other findings in the next chapter.

Table 12: Summary of consumer participants

Consumer	Gender	Age group
1. AF	Female	41 – 50
2. DF	Female	31 – 40
3. DK	Female	31 – 40
4. KT	Female	41 – 50
5. MG	Female	41 – 50
6. MH	Female	31 – 40
7. PK	Female	31 – 40
8. SH	Male	41 – 50
9. SW	Female	31 – 40
10. XY	Female	31 – 40

4.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher paid special attention to ethical considerations as more researcher-participant interactions are involved in a qualitative study. Prior to the conduct of fieldwork, approval was sought and obtained from the Committee for Ethics in Human Research from the University of Canberra in August 2013 (project number: HREC 14-165). Annual reviews in the form of written reports were provided to the Committee to update on the project progress and to indicate continued compliance with the approved protocol. The researcher is reminded of the need to treat human subjects with respect during the expeditious conduct of the research. In doing so, the following steps were taken to address ethical issues that may arise during the research.

Informed consent procedures

A copy of the participant information form detailing the research objectives, benefits, and participant's involvement was sent to the participants via email before the interview sessions. At the start of the interview, participants were reminded they have the opportunity to seek clarifications, the right to not answer any questions, or to withdraw at any time. All participants had given their written informed consent prior to the interview. The researcher had ensured that participation is voluntary and informed.

Confidentiality of participants

Provisions for confidentiality and anonymity were explained to the participants prior to the interviews. In the writing of this thesis, participants' real identities were protected by assigning aliases to each of them (Creswell, 2007) and the aliases were identifiable by the researcher alone.

Protection from harm

The researcher took explicit care to ensure the participants were unharmed, both psychologically and physically, before, during and after the interviews. The interview questions were directed toward their experiences and opinions and were carefully worded to avoid any sensitivity to the participants. The research did not put the participants in a situation where they might be at risk of harm. No detrimental effect was inflicted on the participants during the data collection process.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This research aimed to study how impression management is employed on retail websites through the strategic control of information published on retail websites. This Chapter describes how the research questions and the conceptual model developed in the earlier chapter influenced the design of the study. The research used a qualitative case study to analyse the cases of online retail stores through semi-structured interviews and web content analysis. The data collection involved three sources, interviews with online retailers based in Singapore, interviews and written responses by consumers as well as the gathering of web content data from the websites of retail stores. The analysis methods of the interviews and website data included open, axial and selective coding procedures and content analysis respectively. In addition, strategies were taken to ensure quality in the research by addressing concerns for validity and reliability. Finally, the Chapter discusses the ethical considerations regarding the study. Table 13 summarises the important considerations undertaken in the design of this research.

Table 13: Summary of the study's methodological considerations

Methodological Aspect		Consideration	Illustration
Methodology	Choice of methodology	Consideration for a case study must be given to the nature of research question, degree of control over study subjects, nature of event (contemporary versus historic) (Yin, 2009).	This qualitative case study answers "how" questions about a contemporary phenomenon (impression management in e-commerce), over which the researcher has no control over the participants' behaviour.
Sampling	Sampling type	Sampling is purposive in case studies (Flick, 2014).	Cases and participants are screened to meet research objectives before recruitment.
	Case selection	The literal replication method is used to predict similar results (Yin, 2009).	Cases are selected from small businesses (firm size) in B2C e-commerce (industry) based in Singapore (geographical location).
	Participant selection	Study subjects comprise of retailers who are key decision-makers of the firm and consumers who are experienced online shoppers.	Retailer participants are founders and/or owners of online stores while consumer participants have shopped at least once during the past twelve months.
Data collection	Choice of data collection method	Two sources of qualitative data are considered: 1. Interviews are able to elicit rich and detailed viewpoints from the study subjects (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) 2. The study of websites essentially involves web content.	In-depth interviews with participants and gathering of detailed content from the retail websites.

Methodological Aspect		Consideration	Illustration
	Choice of interview technique	Semi-structured interview provides the balance between openness and structure (Flick, 2014)	Interview questions are prepared in advance and kept open-ended.
	Conduct of interviews	Qualitative interviewing is flexible (Bryman & Bell, 2011)	The order of questions can be adjusted or new questions asked, so as to increase participant responsiveness.
	Data recording	Audio recording best captures full and accurate text of what the study subjects say (Seidman, 2006)	All interviews are audio-recorded with permission from the participants. Audio recordings are transcribed into text for analysis.
Data analysis	Coding and interpretation of interview data	The constant comparison method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) enables a systematic approach towards data analysis through open, axial and selective coding. Data becomes meaningful as the "connections between different components and aspects of the data [..] increase our understanding" (Willig, 2014, p. 136).	*In vivo* codes are first generated as open codes before comparison and abstraction of theoretical concepts in first level (open codes), second level (axial codes) and third level (selective code).
	Analysing content of websites	Analysis by making inferences (Krippendorff, 2013)	Comparison of information across web categories allows the researcher to infer the stores' actions and tactics.

Methodological Aspect		Consideration	Illustration
	Triangulation	Data triangulation of two different data sources - interviews and website content (Patton, 1987)	Wherever possible, themes that emerge from one data source are corroborated with the other source.
Research ethics	Treatment of human subjects	1. Informed consent 2. Confidentiality of research participants	1. Participants received the information form prior to the interview. Participants granted their consent to the interview by signing the consent form. 2. Participants' real identity are masked by referring to their assigned initials in the thesis.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.1 Chapter Introduction

Chapter 5 reports the findings of the data analysis from two data sources - interviews with online storeowners and consumers, and web content of online stores' websites. As mentioned in the previous chapter (Section 4.4.5), an analysis of the data revealed three major findings that emerged from six themes using an adapted version of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) coding paradigm (see Table 14 for a summary).

Table 14: Findings that emerged from themes in data analysis

Themes	Classification (used in coding paradigm)
1. Determining entrepreneurial motivation	Condition
2. Applying strategic actions on information elements	Strategies
3. Deriving information tactics	Strategies
4. Developing impression management tactics	Strategies
5. Projecting store images	Phenomenon
6. Presenting the web façade	Consequence

The themes classified under strategies and phenomenon (themes 2 to 6) were considered most relevant in directly answering the research question: *"How do under-resourced online retailers shape store images through impression management on retail websites?"*

Two major findings of this thesis were formed from themes 2 to 6:

1. Manipulation of information by applying strategic actions to web information elements
2. Development of impression management tactics that shape store images

The remaining theme (theme 1) formed a minor finding on the influence of entrepreneurial motivation on impression management.

The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the detailed description of the above findings based on the insights shared by retailers and the results of the content analysis performed on the retailers' websites. The findings on impression management tactics were further supplemented with consumer opinions that either complemented or contrasted the intended image projected by the stores.

5.2 Finding 1: Manipulation of Information by Applying Strategic Actions to Information Elements

The first major finding included two themes:

- Applying strategic actions on information elements
- Deriving information tactics

Since these two themes are closely related and interwoven, its analyses are combined and described together in this section.

Four categories of strategic actions were identified from the analysis of the interviews and web content: reveal, dramatise, disclose selectively and conceal. Reveal is an option for a store to disclose a large amount of information, but not necessary full disclosure. Dramatise when chosen as an option, displays information in an exaggerated fashion, leveraging either on language or imagery appeals. A store can choose to disclose some information components but not others, by means of selective disclosure. Finally, conceal is an option where information is unavailable on the website.

Information tactics are the outcomes when strategic actions are applied to information elements on retail websites. The analysis further identified six information tactics, which are described in detail in the following sub-sections:

1. Extensive elaboration
2. Visual amplification
3. Language exaggeration
4. Figurative reinterpretation
5. Selective disclosure
6. Complete omission

5.2.1 Information Tactic 1: Extensive Elaboration

The data suggested that online stores revealed information by using extensive elaboration as a tactic. Extensive elaboration is an information tactic derived from the application of the strategic action ‘reveal’. The subject of the elaboration was often the store’s privacy policies as well as terms and conditions. The privacy page is typically the longest webpage, cluttered with words and reader-unfriendly. For example, the privacy policy of LL_STORE consisted of 1,920 words, taking up space that is approximately the length of five computer screens. PC_STORE, on the other hand, has the longest "Terms and Conditions" page with 2,977 words.

Although retailers believed that consumers generally do not read through the detailed contents of the privacy policy or terms and conditions, publishing a privacy policy was important. The presence of the privacy policy gave Retailer MT's clients "a peace of mind", without which they "do not know what the store will do [or] will it sell their information to a third party". Retailer DC agreed, "no one wants their data to be used unnecessarily, especially by strangers".

A survey of the retailers' websites also suggested that retailers viewed privacy policies as important and hence this explained for the extensive elaboration of the policies. For example, in the opening statement of PT_STORE's privacy policy page is: "Your privacy is important to us". ML_STORE proclaimed that they have "the utmost respect for the privacy" of their consumers. Concurring, SJ_STORE declared: "We fully appreciate and respect the importance of privacy on the Internet" and is "totally committed to protecting the privacy of our site visitors and customers". PT_STORE further stated the purpose of its privacy policy as: "We provide this notice explaining our online information practices and the choices you can make about the way your information is collected and used". On a similar note, the reason PC_STORE published its privacy policy is for consumers to be "aware of what information we collect, how we use it, and under what circumstances, if any, we use and/or disclose it".

A content analysis of the privacy policies revealed two key messages that are buried deeply within lengthy policy descriptions. The first message concerned the actions taken by the retailer in handling the buyer's data, and the second related to the expectations of the retailer on the buyer's role in data protection.

First, the privacy policies explained the reasons for the collection of customers' personal information and described the collection, usage, protection, disclosure and sharing with third-parties. Retailers collected customer information for "internal record keeping", "to improve our website in order to tailor it to customer needs" and for "market research purposes". ML_STORE used the information to contact customers when the store runs promotions, contests or conduct feedback surveys, while GT_STORE channelled the feedback that customers provide towards improving the quality of products and services. Online stores revealed that they protect customer information through implementing "appropriate physical and electronic procedures to safeguard and secure the information" (PT_STORE and ML_STORE), taking "reasonable precautions and follow industry best practices"

(PC_STORE) and securing the website with the latest encryption technology (PT_STORE). Retailers further assured consumers that their information is “not lost, misused, [unauthorized] accessed, disclosed, altered or destroyed” during the processes of “data collection, storage and processing” (PC_STORE and GT_STORE). The sharing of customer’s personal information with third party service providers was deemed necessary only if it is a “part of providing a service” (SJ_STORE), “to fulfil the order” (PT_STORE), or “for those limited purposes that you have given us your permission” (GT_STORE). Online stores also pledged not to sell, trade or rent customer personal identification information for monetary gains (GT_STORE and SJ_STORE).

Second, the privacy policy pages informed buyers of the retailers’ expectations on the former’s role in privacy practices. Several stores indicated their assumptions on customer’s implicit acceptance of the store’s terms by continual usage of their websites (GT_STORE, PC_STORE and PT_STORE). It seemed that online stores expect their customers to be proactive users of the websites as well. Customers who wished to withdraw previously granted consent should contact the stores (PC_STORE). They are expected to take initiative to unsubscribe from the stores’ mailing list if they wish to discontinue receiving emails (GT_STORE and SJ_STORE) or to modify their browser’s settings if they refuse the use of browser cookies (GT_STORE, ML_STORE and SJ_STORE). Additionally, registered users should keep their accounts “safe and secure” (SJ_STORE), update their personal information when there are changes (PT_STORE), and review the privacy policies of the stores and third-party service providers regularly (GT_STORE, PC_STORE and SJ_STORE).

Privacy policies tend to emphasise the joint responsibility of data protection by both retailers and buyers. Where privacy policies are published on retailers’ websites, they are usually long, descriptive and are elaborated extensively. A careful reading is required to understand the policies. Due to its length and presentation, consumers may however be discouraged to read the privacy policies in full, or any part of it, and hence may have missed important assumptions, recommendations and messages from the retailers. Although deemed as important for consumers to know, the positioning of the privacy policy at the bottom of homepages often fails to attract consumers’ attention. An exception is MR_STORE, where the Terms of Sale is conveniently located near the top of the home page.

5.2.2 Information Tactic 2: Visual Amplification

Visual amplification is an information tactic derived from applying the strategic action 'dramatise' on information on retail websites. A visual amplification tactic draws attention to a key message that a store wished to convey through the use of attractive, animated or static images and graphics. Retail websites used four elements of the visual amplification tactic, in the form of animation, videos, high quality photos and graphics.

Animation

The majority of retail websites surveyed use animated web designs on their home page as a means to attract visitors' attention. Serving as a focal point for the site, the animation often occupied a big space on the home page, and a significant portion of the computer screen. The animated slider typically comprised of a montage of moving image containing three to six images of products, ongoing promotions, or store announcements. Large, attractive and high quality images grabbed the visitor's attention to stay within the site. Used purely as an aesthetic tool, its purpose was to amplify the stores' message to web visitors.

Videos

Through the use of video clips on websites, retailers were able to provide usage demonstrations for products that require assembling or adjustments during use. For example, PL_STORE embedded seven instructional videos on the usage of baby slings to demonstrate "all the different ways of carrying" a baby. By showcasing the product in action, each video clip was short (lasting about half to five minutes), purposeful (focusing on one carrying technique) and high quality. Similarly, VK_STORE embedded videos in product pages about installing and using elderly bed rails as Retailer VK considered these products as "more complex".

Photographs

Retail websites attempted to attract visitors' attention through visually enticing photography. Product photography provided consumers with a visual sense of the products and is therefore important for merchandise that depends on looks to sell. For example, ML_STORE posted photographs taken from multiple angles of their bags – front, side, inner and bottom views. Besides conveying product features, the photographs showed a sense of scale thus allowing the buyer to see the relative size of an item in comparison to a person. On PL_STORE's website, its dresses were worn on Asian women models to help local women buyers visualise the size and design on them. Product photos with image zoom features showed close-up details, such as the print designs on dresses (AS_STORE) and the fine prints on food labels (GT_STORE). Retailers also used pretty images to suggest ways the product could be used, for example, "pictures of table setting" (NL_STORE).

Graphics

Graphics are the fourth type of visual displays widely used on retail websites. For example, PL_STORE displayed large graphical images of awards at the bottom of all its webpages to draw attention of web visitors to its award-winning products. The use of text-based graphics with large, bold fonts in bright colour contrasts is yet another way retailers could emphasise their message to consumers. For example, the words "FREE SHIPPING" stood out prominently on GT_STORE's home page due to the use of upper case letters and the colour contrast of white letters on red background.

5.2.3 Information Tactic 3: Language Exaggeration

A review of the messages posted on retail websites revealed that stores sometimes exaggerate their claims on product price and product characteristics to draw attention to specific aspects they wanted buyers to notice. Language exaggeration is the second information tactic as a result of the 'dramatise' action being applied to information published on retail websites. An exaggerated language style is a tactic that overstates information through the use of repeating phrases or superlative words. The repetition of keywords used in describing the characteristics of organic and natural products one of the retailer's websites is such an example. The word 'organic' was repeated 20 times in the ingredient list of a concealer product sold in JE_STORE. In addition, nearly all products in JE_STORE had the phrase 'certified organic' appended at the end of its ingredient list. By repeating the keyword 'organic', JE_STORE took on a rhetorical tactic to create a powerful cohesive effect on consumers of the store's specialty in organic products. Using a similar tactic, IS_STORE repeatedly emphasised that the ingredients of a particular hair colouring product is "100%" chemical-free to create the impression that the product is indeed organic. Similarly, a coffee creamer product sold in GT_STORE is described as "*zero* calories, *zero* fat, no carbohydrate, Gluten-*free*, sugar *free*, dairy *free*".

A second type of exaggerated language found on the stores' websites is the use of superlative adjectives, such as "cheapest", "most" or "best", to describe a product. For example, GT_STORE claimed they sell the "cheapest" quality product at an affordable pricing, and offered the "price match guarantee" scheme that allowed customers to seek reimbursements on the price difference if they found a lower retail price elsewhere. Other usage of superlative adjectives included a dark chocolate bar in GT_STORE that is described as "a delicacy in the *most* refined and *purest* form". Over at ES_STORE, the top reason cited as to why parents should buy from the store is that the store "stocks only the *best* titles". Based on the above analysis, it can be said that exaggeration is visible in the websites of numerous stores.

5.2.4 Information Tactic 4: Figurative Reinterpretation

The third information tactic derived from the application of the strategic action 'dramatise' is figurative reinterpretation. Figurative reinterpretation involves creative rephrasing of information that is originally expressed in plain, simple everyday language into metaphoric or symbolic language. Online stores often creatively described colour, one of the key product attributes, and that influenced buying decisions. Rephrasing the product description is viewed as a part of marketing strategy to increase the products' appeal to customers. According to Retailer DI who imported the company's yarns from Japan, the original product description was in Japanese language, and she reckoned "it doesn't make any sense to my customers [because] most of my customers are Singaporeans, and they can't read Japanese". The yarn manufacturer used French names, such as "Larkin", "Daphne", or "Flambés", but these yarn colour names carried little meaning to the buyers, and therefore Retailer DI assigned new names for each of the yarns to make them appear more attractive.

Retailers used various renaming schemes to describe their product colours creatively and figuratively. For example, one of Retailer DI's naming scheme was based on fruit flavours: "That is pink, I called it cherry; [if it] is red, I called it strawberry". She added that when she renamed her yarn collections as 'spring cotton', 'sherbet cotton', 'candy floss cotton' and 'gelato cotton', her customers reacted favourably: "Oh.. so sweet!" She recalled that her customers are attracted to buy because of the fanciful names: "They want to buy candy floss cotton, they say [it sounds as though it is] very soft". The colour schemes of diaper bags at ML_STORE were described using imaginative names that closely match its actual looks. For example, charcoal was used to describe a shade of grey, sherbert for an orange-like shade, tawny instead of yellowish-brown, and pistachio for a greenish tone. At JE_STORE, the colours of nail polish were creatively associated with specific symbols, people, events or things. For example, Woodstock denotes green[8], Democrat stands for red[9], and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" reminds people of purple[10]. The use of metaphor in renaming colours made the product appear more interesting for the shopper.

Besides creative renaming of colours, artistic, descriptive labels were used to describe the print patterns on the apparels. For example, the prints of a 'graphic dress' are labelled as 'abstract blue', 'abstract black' and 'checkered black' at AS_STORE. By creatively reinterpreting and paraphrasing product attributes such as colours and print patterns, retailers attempted to describe their products in the most compelling fashion possible.

5.2.5 Information Tactic 5: Selective Disclosure

As an information tactic used by online retailers, selective disclosure revealed information related to a particular aspect of an information element while omitting others. The decision to reveal information may be made based on four key considerations, that is, product nature, popularity of product, store strategy and volume of information.

Product nature

A retailer could use the tactic of selective disclosure by providing varying amount of information depending on the nature of the product. For example, IS_STORE listed more information about organic products than non-organic ones on their website. The reason was that health-conscious consumers demanded for detailed information about organic products. They wanted to know the fine-grain details of the product that support its claims of being organic and natural, especially if it involved foodstuffs that are ingested or skin care products that come into direct contact with the skin. Retailer IS shared that the complete list of ingredients in organic body care products are disclosed online due to demands from eco-conscious consumers. Yet, not all ingredients were listed on non-organic products. Retailer IS explained in the following quote:

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[8] Woodstock was a musical festival in US in the 1990s during which the famous rock band 'Green Day' performed, and hence the mention of 'Woodstock' will lead customers to think of green.

[9] Colours are also used to represent political ideologies. In Europe, red signifies social democracy, and therefore the word 'Democrat' is associated with red.

[10] The mention of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', a Shakespeare's play, conjures the images of the purple flower used to make into a love potion.

> For example, if a brand is about a natural and organic product, we will list all the ingredients, because you know that people who come are really looking for a product that they are very interested in the ingredients, right? For another brand, you know people who are ingredient-conscious will not look for such a brand. We will not list the full list of ingredients because we know that is not important to the person who is using it.

A second example involved the description of apparel size. Although online fashion stores typically indicated apparel sizes, Retailer AS shared that she is caught in a dilemma whether to indicate the size measurements of the maternity apparel she sells. She admitted that "there [are] a lot of online shops selling clothes and they give you measurement [but] we can't do that." As the waistlines of maternity clothes are typically elastic, the measurements can differ greatly when laid flat and when stretched to the maximum, she argues. She anticipated possible confusion from her customers when no sizing indicated and yet when the exact sizing is specified, she expected her customer's response is a misfit. She described the problem as "a double-edged sword" and it has always been a challenge to her. When the precise product measurements are tricky and a detailed product representation on the web becomes cumbersome, Retailer AS chose not to display the size measurements of selected maternity wear on her website or replaced it with a generic 'free size' label instead.

Popularity of product

The popularity of a product might influence a retailer's decision to provide more information on its website. For a grocery store such as GT_STORE, the more popular a food product is, the higher the demand for its information, and hence the more likely its nutritional value information is available on the website. Retailer GT acknowledged that "the key products that are more popular, the products that you need in Singapore, we have put up the nutritional information".

On the other hand, popular products with fast sales turnaround might not be listed on the online store. For example, Retailer GT revealed that highly perishable items with fast turnover of sales do not have expiry dates listed on her website. She explained that sales of food items such as ice cream and cakes were fast-moving and replenished weekly: "It moves so fast and we don't buy a lot. The cakes sell out nearly every three to four days".

Similarly, Retailer PL opined that it was not necessary to upload every product onto her online store because "certain products sell very quickly". She added: "Certain designs that comes in, I never even have the time to put it up and it is sold out". Retailer AS commented that due to the large variety of baby clothes in terms of designs, sizing and colours, it is tedious for her to update the entire inventory into her online store. She concurred the impracticality of displaying each and every product online, especially those that were reasonably fast-moving: "For baby clothes, we have so many products, too many sizing, too many colours, too many prints. We don't [upload] photos for certain products because I think it's just way too fast, the movement [of stock]." Retailers' responses suggested that updating of fast selling and popular items in the online store might not be practical for small businesses.

Store Strategy

Retailers used the selective disclosure tactic as part of their store's marketing strategy when it came to product launch, ensuring product relevance and testing product marketability. For example, Retailer MR's strategy was to time the release of new books to once every few months, so as to not overwhelm her regular customers with a long list of new book titles. Spreading out the new book launches into three or four times a year, she leveraged each release as a sales opportunity to contact her regular buyers. She said: "If I launch 30 books [at one go], the parents will be too overwhelmed. There are too many pages to click. So each time, I try to keep the page to 20 [titles]. When I have a mailing list, it is easier to feature these books. I think parents would like to see that there are new arrivals more often". She explained the rationale for her strategy: "Each time you send a mailer, you contact your customers one more time, instead of one-time and then they forget about it."

Prior to the release of new products for sale on her online store, Retailer JH tested how well-received her new products are by offering them as freebies to her customers. She said: "I have a lot more things but I don't really put them online. When the customer received the freebies, they'd say, 'Oh I didn't know that you have these wooden blocks!' and they asked me whether I am selling it. That's when I really put them online".

As part of his store's branding strategy, Retailer PT talked about carefully excluding the genre of books that is deemed unfitting of his Catholic bookstore's image. He shared: "I am very careful about building this brand that we only reach out to Christians or Catholics on Catholics books, but there are certain books that I feel of certain benefits, but I do not have them listed on the website, unless I have read it myself, and I can defend it. So, information that [is] not relevant, we don't put [it] on our website."

Volume of information

Information overload is a reason cited by retailers who used the selective disclosure tactic as they found it overwhelming to update their website with every piece of product information they have on hand. For example, Retailer IS explained that due to "logistic reasons", it is challenging for her to list expiry dates for the body and hair care products on her website. "So currently we don't list expiry dates. It's because it's difficult to track the batches. Different batches have different expiry dates, so we don't list", adds Retailer IS. Similarly, Retailer AS lamented at the difficulty of organizing her stock in the online catalogue: "It's very hard for us to catalogue. We do have a lot but it's just way too many to put [online]." Retailer GT shared similar sentiments when it came to listing the nutritional information of her food products as "it takes a long time to do, but we are doing it now. Fifty per cent of the food products have nutritional information online but the other fifty per cent is still in the process".

5.2.6 Information Tactic 6: Complete Omission

Complete omission is an information tactic derived from the application of the strategic action 'conceal'. A complete omission tactic is one where information is left out or missing from the store's website. For example, the content analysis of the stores' websites indicated that the majority of stores did not publish any privacy policy. The complete omission of privacy policies on some websites sharply contrasted with the extensive, lengthy descriptions of policies published on the other retailers' websites.

Another example of complete omission is that of original brand label. The omission of original brand labelling is DI_STORE's business strategy, that is, to sell through "white labels". Online retailers typically purchased stock from suppliers or manufacturers to resell in the original form. Retailer DI rebranded her suppliers' products and sells it as her own. She shared that she printed her own labels with her store name on it and replaced them with the originals before putting them up for sale. Concealing the yarns' brand and manufacturer name is a way for her way to protect her business model. She asserted: "I have to assure that they [competitors] cannot easily find out who my yarn manufacturers are. None of my buyers know who my yarn manufacturers are. Only I know." She explained that her yarn suppliers are her "commercial secret". She further elaborated: "My business model is: if you have it, I don't sell it; if you don't have it, I sell it. You don't know who [my] yarn manufacturers are, and that's deliberate, because [these] manufacturers don't supply to Singapore market".

Table 15 summarises the four strategic actions and the corresponding information tactics. The table also includes the communication symbols used by each of the information tactic, the information elements of websites in which the tactics can be applied to. Two categories of communication symbols were used by online retailers in this study: language, in terms of written text, and imagery, both static and motion. The majority of the information tactics were language-based, except for visual amplification. Several tactics were applied on product information, such as describing the product characteristics, product brand, and product assortment. Tactics could also be applied to other information elements, such as seller, shipping, privacy and store policies. Each strategic action described in the table is illustrated with an example taken from the websites surveyed.

Table 15: Summary of information actions and tactics used by online retailers

Strategic Action	Information Tactic and Description	Information Elements	Symbols Used	Example
Reveal	Extensive elaboration: Information is described in detail, and usually in long paragraphs, which requires careful reading	Privacy policy, Store policy	Language (written text)	Thousands of words were used to explain the store's privacy policy and terms of sales. One of the longest privacy policy on a retailer website contained 1,920 words while the longest Terms and Conditions page on another website had 2,977 words.
Dramatise	Visual amplification: Information is conveyed using large and attractive images or graphics to attract attention	Product description, product assortment, seller identity	Imagery (Includes animation, video, photographs, and graphics)	The animation of sliding images on websites' home pages were used to capture consumers' attention. For example, the words "FREE SHIPPING" were displayed on the home page of a retailer in capital letters, large font size, and in red and white colour contrast.
	Language exaggeration: Information is overstated in words	Product description	Language (written text) (Includes repeated phrases and superlatives)	An example of repeated phrases was found on a retailer website where the keyword 'organic' appears 20 times in a product's ingredient list. The ingredient list reads as: Organic Green Tea, Organic Rose Hydrosol, Organic Green Coffee, Organic Rice Powder, Organic Peach, Organic Apricot, Organic Carrot, Organic Pomegranate, Organic Cocoa Bean, Organic Goji Berry and Organic Tomato, Aloe Vera, Organic Lavender, Organic

Strategic Action	Information Tactic and Description	Information Elements	Symbols Used	Example
				Chamomile, Organic Rosehip Oil, Extracts of Organic Rosemary, Organic Oregano, Organic Thyme, Organic Grapefruit Seed, Organic Goldenseal, Certified Organic
	Figurative Reinterpretation: Information is rephrased in a figurative way instead of the simple, plain everyday language	Product description, product assortment	Language (written text)	The colour description of products was creatively renamed. For example, on a retailer website, the colours of nail polish were described as: • Woodstock • Democrat • Midsummer Night's Dream
Disclose selectively	Selective disclosure: Information related to only a particular aspect is revealed	Product description, product usage	Language (written text)	A longer list of ingredients was displayed for organic products as compared to non-organic products. For example, the ingredients for an organic hair colouring product on a retailer website was described as having: • Certified organic ingredients • 12 natural oils and extracts • 100% grey hair coverage • 100% Ammonia free • 100% Parabens free • 100% Resorcinol free • 100% SLS-free • Very low PPD content

Strategic Action	Information Tactic and Description	Information Elements	Symbols Used	Example
				In comparison, a non-organic hair product sold by the same retailer had a simpler description: • Alcohol free • Contains Panthenol, Titanium Dioxide and Sodium PC – a natural moisturising factor
Conceal	Complete omission: Information is totally left out and unavailable on the website	Privacy policy, seller identity	-	Complete absence of privacy policy or seller information on retailer websites

5.3 Finding 2: Development of Impression Management Tactics that Shape Store Images

The second major finding was derived from three themes:

- Developing impression management tactics
- Projecting store images
- Presenting the web façade

The analysis identified nine impression management tactics employed by e-commerce stores:

1. Emphasise/de-emphasise product quality
2. Emulate large retailers
3. Strategically disclose seller identity
4. Draw attention to online social relations
5. Proclaim commitment to privacy promises
6. Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment
7. Appeal to institutional trust
8. Transfer agency
9. Appear bureaucratic

Below are the impression management tactics used by online retailers in turn supports the fostering of four store images:

1. Reputable
2. Legitimate
3. Trustworthy
4. Assertive

Based on the four store images described in the previous sub-sections, two facets emerged from further data analysis. The persuasive facet occurred when retailers attempted to put up positive and favourable images of reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness in an attempt to convince consumers to make a purchase. On the contrary, the protective facet was evident when retailers were behaving assertively towards consumers to avert challenging situations.

A survey of the IM tactics used by online stores showed that they typically exhibit two to four store images. See Appendix 15 for the complete list of stores and the images they project. This study characterised stores that project all four images as impressionists, while stores that exhibited fewer images (two or three) are considered as minimalists. Appendix 16 shows a list of online stores categorized according to their web façades. Appendices 16.1 and 16.2 each show an example of a minimalist and an impressionist web store.

The following sub-sections describe the four store images and their corresponding impression management tactics in detail. Consumer opinions of the tactics are appended at the end of each sub-section.

5.3.1 Creating a Reputable Store Image

Retailers attempted to create a reputable store image through the utilization of information tactics that emphasised on product quality, product range and a professionally designed website (see Table 16). To convey the quality of the products their store sells, participants used a combination of the following two ways: first, through the display of awards and testimonials, and second, through positive product reviews, compelling product descriptions and beautiful product photography.

Table 16: Reputable store image and the corresponding impression management tactics

Store Image	IM Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic
Reputable	Emphasise high quality; De-emphasise low or average quality	Highlighting awards and customer testimonials to appear reputable
		Writing compelling product descriptions
		Presenting professional product photographs
		Fully disclosing favourable product attributes (e.g. organic properties) while partially disclosing unfavourable attributes
	Emulate big retailers	Displaying an entire page of products to appear to offer wide variety
		Adopting web design of big retailers

5.3.1.1 Impression Management Tactic 1: Emphasis and De-emphasis on Product Quality

To portray a reputable store image, online retailers used the IM tactic of emphasising or de-emphasising the quality of their products. The emphasis of product quality was carried out in three ways: first, through awards and customer testimonials; second, through compelling product descriptions; and third, through professional product photography.

Online retailers displayed awards they had won and selected customer testimonials on their websites to demonstrate the recognition of quality others have bestowed unto them. In one example, one retailer, PL_STORE, displayed three awards won during the years 2011 and 2012 for being "the best one-stop shop for nursing needs" and an award-winning nursing product. Showcased on every single webpage of their website, the three awards relentlessly reminded consumers of the store's and the product's past achievements. Other retailers either dedicated an entire section of their websites or a huge portion of their homepage to display a long list of favourable feedback from buyers. Most of the feedback revolved around good service, good product quality and selection, prompt delivery and nice packaging. Examples of comments posted include:

> "Excellent customer services with prompt reply and good books recommendations! All the books I got are in very good condition and on time delivery!" (Tran commented about ES_STORE on 10 June 2016)
>
> "It's very comfortable and the quality is good" (Faridah commented about PL_STORE on 17 February 2014)
>
> "Loved the great service and prompt delivery" (Audrina commented about MR_STORE on 28 December 2015)

In the absence of awards and testimonials, retailers wrote positive product reviews and compelling descriptions, which were often accompanied by beautiful product visuals as a way to highlight the strengths and benefits of the products they sell. For example, Retailer JH provided recommendation for her products and she commented:

> I would tell people these [products] are the really good ones, how they compare to the other brands and I recommend them. So, after hearing that personal description or my experience with that product, they are more willing to buy or try it out. [I gave] useful information that would help them in making the decision to purchase.

Another retailer, ES, a children bookseller, posted "personalized reviews for picture books", of which some are her personal reviews and others are "references from other customers who have read the book". Her reviews aimed to provide customers an evaluation of the books in terms of its artwork, teaching and entertainment value. As expected, the reviews are mostly positive, for example, "a wonderful story" and "children are sure to enjoy". The impression the store wished to create is that the books in ES_STORE are "really good", which is what was stated on the website.

Retailer websites used compelling product descriptions and professional photography abundantly in an attempt to convince consumers of the product's quality. The descriptions highlighted the product benefits and a "virtual" sense of touching the product when using it. ML_STORE described its JP Lizzy diaper bags as "a little slice of heaven", "flaunting an urban sophistication" and "the ultimate baby bag in disguise". Using sensory words to accentuate yarn quality, DI_STORE described their 'Candy Floss' cotton yarn as "bunny tail-*soft*, candy floss-*fluffy*". In a similar way, IS_STORE's description of its product played on the senses of smell, touch and sight: "Bursting with the *yummy scent* of strawberries and a delightful hint of vanilla caramel, Strawberry Magic Natural Shampoo not only makes hair feel good, it smells good too! It gently and effectively cleanses and moisturizes, leaving hair *soft* and manageable. Your child's hair will look *glossier* and healthier with regular use."

While the IM tactic of emphasising product quality was a common phenomenon on retail websites, de-emphasising average or low quality was less apparent but was still observed in a few web stores. For example, IS_STORE displayed a shorter list of ingredients for non-organic products in comparison to the full list for organic products.
A survey of consumer perceptions showed that they generally agreed that awards and detailed descriptions gave them an impression of good product quality. Awards were deemed more credible (according to Consumers DF, MG and XY) than product descriptions as they demonstrate "industry recognition" (quoted by Consumer XY). Some consumers viewed detailed descriptions as a way of showing good quality while others were not convinced. Consumer DF said: "they can use very powerful words to describe a product but they are not convincing [to me]."

5.3.1.2 Impression Management Tactic 2: Emulate Big Retailers

Online retailers used the IM tactic of emulating big competitors in an attempt to portray a reputable image. Retail websites surveyed in this study have a well-designed homepage with attractive photographs or images taking centre stage. For example, SJ_STORE's website displayed a full screen animation of their cartoon characters, which appears on all their products. The home page of PC_STORE had a full-width animated slider of their two main lines of products – books and figurine toys. AS_STORE positioned a full screen collage of their maternity dresses and promotions at the forefront of the website. IS_STORE and PL_STORE both placed an animated slider of pretty product images that grabbed the web visitors' attention immediately. Several other stores such as JE_STORE, NL_STORE, and ML_STORE, similarly used a slider of graphics and images to display promotions and announcements on the home page. The website of JE_STORE also adopted a clean look that is in line with their brand image of "pure, organic and all natural". On ML_STORE's home page, a nicely textured background sat behind a collage of brightly coloured graphics and photographs of bags. Visually stimulating presentations aimed to capture the visitor's attention and attracted them to browse and explore the website further.

To appear offering a wide variety of products, retailers used a grid layout to organise its homepage to maximise the display of items. For example, GT_STORE displayed several product categories occupying a large portion of their website's homepage. At the centre were new products for the current month; on the left are product categories, search, new products, specials, and on the right, were best sellers, product reviews and Twitter feeds. Similarly, PC_STORE's website was organised in a grid format and with a central focus on newly added products, followed by recommended books and featured toys. Together, these two communicative tactics suggested online stores in this study attempt to project a reputable image that emulated the quality and offerings often associated with big box retailers.

There was mixed feedback from consumers about whether the look-and-feel of an online store's homepage is a tell-tale sign of its reputation and size. Consumers perceived stores with a wide variety of products as big and reputable (e.g. Consumers AF, MG, MH and PK). Consumer AF explained: "They do look like reputable because I see a lot of products, and I am familiar with one of the brands, which is a good brand. So, if they are selling a good brand, then I assume they are reputable". Others disagreed, in particular Consumer KT commented: "the look-and-feel don't tell anything".

5.3.2 Creating a Legitimate Store Image

Retailers attempted to demonstrate that they are legitimate stores through using two tactics: by partially disclosing the retailer's identity and by drawing attention to social media relations with a large group of people (see Table 17).

Table 17: Legitimate store image and the corresponding impression management tactics

Store Image	IM Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic
Legitimate	Disclose seller's information which enables verification of seller's identity	Revealing sellers' faces and names to enhance credibility
		Providing multiple means of contact to enhance contactability
	Draw attention to social relationships and acceptance by an online community	Placing links, feeds and widgets on homepage to social media fan page to engage virtually

5.3.2.1 Impression Management Tactic 3: Seller Disclosure

The IM tactic of seller disclosure prevailed when retailers reveal personal information about themselves to demonstrate their legitimacy online. On the "About Us" webpage of online stores, retailers disclosed their first names (e.g. Peter), posted photographs of themselves and/or with their family members (e.g. Retailers AS, GT, ML, PL and PT) and wrote stories about how their stores were started (e.g. Retailers GT, PL). Revealing their faces, first names, photos and stories about themselves helped to build a sense of authenticity for the retailers, especially for the relatively less known brands on the Internet. Media exposure for retailers such as interviews with newspapers and magazines, were also featured on retail websites (e.g. Retailers DC, MR, SJ and VK). Generally, the more information retailers revealed about themselves, the more identifiable and less mysterious they are.

Online retailers were found to use the IM tactic of disclosing more contact information, hence enabling easier verification of their authenticity. Bricks-and-clicks retailers tend to place emphasis on complementing their online presence with physical presence. Physical stores, showrooms and retail outlets represent longer-term establishments that demonstrated the existence of the business in real life. By providing the address, map and operating hours of their physical locations, retailers gave buyers an extra avenue of reaching them. For example, Retailer GT, who run a brick-and-clicks store, says:

> We have a physical shop, so there is less of a worry for customers because they know if they can't find me online, they can go to the shop to look for us. So our shop is there, we have people, staff there all the time, so we don't have too much of an issue. (If they have) any complaints, they can always go there.

Retailer AS shared similar comments:

> I think most important is, we have an address. Being able to be contacted and [be found] by the customer, whether by email or by address, will be good. We put our office address and we have a hand phone hotline, so they can just call us anytime. There is really somebody running in the shop. It is not like a flight-by-night kind of thing.

Pure-clicks retailers, on the other hand, generally relied on phone calls and emails as the primary mode of communication with their customers. For example, Retailer IS said: "As an online store, I reckon it's largely through email". Retailer PC's initial interaction with customers was "basically through the customer service email address under 'Contact Us'." Retailer JH, who sells through the Etsy marketplace, used the in-built messaging system to start "an Etsy conversation" with her customers. The contact/feedback web form was the frequently used communication channel for Retailer MR, who said: "There is an enquiry form on the website, so they will usually go there".

Retailers acknowledged the importance of providing a phone number for customers to reach them easily. For example, Retailer GT said: "I think that having a contact number is very important because I find that especially my target audience feels more comfortable talking to somebody, a real person over at the other end. So it really helps." Similarly, Retailer ML saw the advantage of communicating verbally over the phone than writing emails: "Sometimes it is easier with the personal touch."

Consumers, on the other hand, do not necessarily think that disclosing personal information about the seller made them appear more authentic. As suggested by Consumer MG: "People can write what they want to write, and we don't really know them. So I won't say they are a scam but I don't think they are authentic too". Only two consumer participants thought the sellers are authentic after reading information about the sellers' families. Consumers also suggested the seller disclosure strategy might be more useful for artisans and craftsmen, who were selling handcrafted products rather than commodities. Additionally, the availability of a store's address and phone number gave Consumer SH an added assurance that the store is real: "A business address tells me that it is probably not a scam, [and] pictures of the owner helped to boost my confidence".

5.3.2.2 Impression Management Tactic 4: Social Relationships and Acceptance within an Online Community

All retailers surveyed for this study, except one (Retailer PT), established a virtual presence in popular social media networks. The prevalence of online stores on social media suggested retailers' perception that a store's online social presence further strengthened an online store's legitimacy. Facebook is by far the most popular among retailers, and Instagram (IG) is second. Further, the websites of AS_STORE, ES_STORE and MR_STORE have embedded Facebook 'Facepile' widgets, which provides a quantitative metric in terms of number of Likes and familiar faces of friends to give a boost to the legitimacy of the web stores. In addition, PL_STORE and GT_STORE both prominently displayed Facebook and Twitter feeds respectively on their website, therefore demonstrating that they were active on both social channels. Retailer DI explained that public conversations on social media serve to demonstrate the authenticity of the seller. In the following quote, she remarked:

> I think IG is very important, because when I chat with some of my customers, other potential customers looking at these chats realized that I'm a real person. They realized that 'She's not a fly by night. She's actually operating. She's not someone who's a scam. She's actually been around for a while. She has customers who talked to her and she talks to them.' So these public texts helped in a sense. Public chats allowed other people who are looking at your chats to realize, 'Oh, her promotion is real.' So they start to get confident that I'm a real person.

The majority of consumer participants mentioned they trusted an online store that is active on social media. For example, Consumer AF said she will trust the online store on Facebook with 'Likes' and Consumer XY perceived these stores as "more legitimate and trustworthy”. Consumer SW opined that ‘Likes’ act as “a review for the store”. Consumer PK added “more ‘Likes’ will increase confidence especially if it is well liked by your friends”.

5.3.3 Creating a Trustworthy Store Image

The results from the analysis suggested that online retailers employ three IM tactics that helped portray a trustworthy store image: first, by proclaiming the store’s commitment to privacy promises through extensive elaboration of privacy policy; and, secondly by proclaiming the store’s commitment to order fulfilment through the provision of regular updates on order processing and delivery; and third, by appealing to consumers’ institutional trust in leading e-payment providers. See Table 18.

Table 18: Trustworthy store image and the corresponding impression management tactics

Store Image	IM Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic
Trustworthy	Proclaim commitment to privacy promises	Providing lengthy privacy policies explaining the actions taken and not taken towards the protection of consumer privacy
	Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment	Managing expectations of delivery timeline; Providing timely and regular updates on order processing; Providing delivery tracking
	Appeal to institutional trust in electronic payment	Displaying symbols of trusted affiliates (e.g. logo of PayPal); Explaining the security of e-payment

5.3.3.1 Impression Management Tactic 5: Proclaim Commitment in Consumer Privacy Protection

Online retailers used the tactic of proclaiming commitment to the protection of consumer privacy to establish an image of trustworthiness. Online stores openly declared the importance of a customer data privacy policy by publishing statements such as “Your privacy is important to us” (PT_STORE), “utmost respect for privacy” (ML_STORE), and “totally committed to protecting the privacy of our site visitors and customers”

(SJ_STORE). The lengthy privacy policies, which ranged from several hundred to two thousand words, signalled considerable effort by retailers. The content of the policies conveyed how the stores will safeguard consumers' personal and technical information through data protection measures. The stores also detailed the circumstances under which customer data was shared with third party service providers, trusted business partners, affiliates and advertisers. Retailers also promised not to sell, trade or rent consumer personal data. In addition, online stores advised consumers to familiarise themselves with the privacy policies and its implications.

Consumer participants were of the opinion that a privacy policy is essential for e-commerce stores and viewed stores without a privacy policy less positively than those who had. When asked to describe their impressions of stores with privacy policy, consumers used positive words such as "professional", "responsible", "committed" and "reputable". On the contrary, consumers viewed stores without privacy policies as "unacceptable", "not reliable" and "terrible". Consumers were divided on whether they read the contents of the privacy policy. Half do not read privacy policy of the stores they purchased from while the rest either browsed through quickly or read selectively.

5.3.3.2 Impression Management Tactic 6: Proclaim Commitment in Order Fulfilment

The tactic of proclaiming commitment for order fulfilment, was employed by online retailers in three ways: first, by informing buyers of the estimated delivery time; second, by providing status updates at key stages of the shopping process and third, by providing tracking of the package during shipping.

Online stores informed customers of their order processing time so as to manage their expectations on waiting time. For example, SJ_STORE stated that: "Your order will be shipped the next business day after the full amount has been received." ML_STORE strived to ship out orders within one to three business days upon the receipt of payment. Retailer DI "post within 3 business days (Mon-Fri) or earlier".

Online stores keep customers informed of the estimated delivery time taken for the package to reach the customer. For example, both AS_STORE and ML_STORE estimated the local delivery as: "Registered mail is 2 days, normal mail is about 3 to 5 days, so that's like the estimated [delivery time]." NL_STORE informed on their website that standard delivery will take 3 working days while express delivery takes only 2 days. MR_STORE estimates: "On average, you should receive your books within 3-7 working days after payment has been received." ES_STORE reminded overseas customers that: "international orders will take from 6 days to 3 weeks for postage time depending on country". PC_STORE gave a broad estimate of "total delivery days approximately 3 to 14 business days (from the payment date)".

Online retailers demonstrated they can be trusted to fulfil buyers' orders by informing buyers with status updates during the process, from the time of order placement to the receipt of goods by customer. The key stages included the receipt of order, the receipt of payment (for stores without shopping carts or those who accept offline payment), and the shipment of goods. Retailer ML sent out three separate notifications: "after the order is placed, once payment is made, once it is shipped - so there are three notifications for customers." Similarly for ES_STORE which does not have an online shopping cart on its website, Retailer ES emailed notifications about receipts of orders, payments and shippings personally to the buyers. She said:

> I will provide three statuses. The first one is the auto email [which] verify that their order has been received. Then the second one is an email that the order has been processed, and we are waiting for the payment, because we are accepting payment through bank transfer. So once they have [made] a payment, they have to reply us with payment details, and that's when we will drop them another reply to say that their package has been shipped, with the delivery date and the tracking number if they opt for registered mail.

Retailers who allowed buyers to track the status of the shipping process attempted to assure buyers they can be trusted to fulfil their orders. Most retailers provided a tracking number from the logistics company if the buyer opted for a registered package, especially when the package is shipped overseas to locations outside of Singapore. GT_STORE was the only retailer in this study who provided delivery by their in-house driver that is "99% reliable to arrive in the communicated time". Customers were able to track the location of the delivery vehicle on the e-store's website on the day of the delivery.

Consumers expected stores to inform them of the estimated delivery time and generally held positive opinions of stores that do so. For example, Consumer AF remarked: "Of course I would want to know, and it better to give me the number of days upfront." Both

Consumers MG and MH expected that the delivery "should not take too long". Consumers perceived stores that inform them of the delivery schedule and/or allowed them to track their packages as "good" (Consumer KT) and "more reliable" (Consumer SW).

5.3.3.3 Impression Management Tactic 7: Appeal to Institutional Trust in Electronic Payment Security

The tactic used to appeal to consumers' trust in established institutions entailed retailers associating themselves with the industry leader in escrow services. By associating with one of the world's most established Internet payment companies, such as PayPal, online stores projected an image of a trusted merchant. PayPal is well known for being a leader in secured online payments and acting as an arbitrator between the seller and buyer in disputed cases. For example, SJ_STORE's explanation of their preference for using PayPal was assuring for consumers who are new to online shopping or e-payment: "PayPal is a secured, fast and convenient way to make payments for both International and Singapore customers".

On a similar note, Retailer DI shared her experience of using PayPal as a buyer had convinced her to use PayPal for her store:

> I have personally very good experience with PayPal as a buyer. I bought something. I disputed it and PayPal stepped in and say, 'Hey seller, you are not doing your buyer a justice. So, we are going to stop you from accepting more sales until you settle this with your buyer.' And I appreciate that because if you [seller] are not being fair to me, I can't stop you from doing it to other buyers. Coming from the perspective of a buyer, as well as a seller, if a shop use PayPal, I feel so much safer.

PayPal was found to be the most common means of electronic payment on retailers' websites. Online stores typically offered e-payment on their websites by linking up with major credit cards, such as Visa, and MasterCard through PayPal. The next most popular e-payment mode among retailers was direct transfer from the buyer to the seller through Internet banking. Direct fund transfer was sometimes preferred as a fast transaction method, but it lacked the mediation mechanism when compared to PayPal.

The responses from consumer participants to this tactic seemed to be polarised. A third of the consumers reported positive impressions with PayPal or stores that use PayPal, while another third expressed contradictory viewpoints. The rest of the consumers gave neutral responses. Consumers who favoured PayPal cited reasons such as “PayPal has been around for quite some time” and “they have strict regulations” (Consumer AF). Consumer SH explained further in the quote below:

> I feel much better if a store can redirect me to PayPal instead of keying in my details into an electronic form, because I don’t want different stores to have my details on file, which I am not sure if they will sell to a third-party. I feel more confident if PayPal can shield that information from the different web merchants, so that makes me feel more confident shopping online.

A few consumers however, remarked that they felt “insecure”, “troublesome” and “tedious” when using PayPal. Consumers who were neutral towards PayPal indicated that it is commonly available on online stores and “is just another mode of payment” (Consumer PK) and “is not necessarily better than others” (Consumer DF).

5.3.4 Creating an Assertive Store Image

The findings suggested that online retailers protect the interest of their stores by portraying an assertive image through the use of two IM tactics: (i) the transfer of agency to the buyer prior to potential occurrence of unsuccessful delivery, and (ii) the imposition of bureaucracy on buyers’ attempts to request for returns or exchanges. Refer to Table 19.

Table 19: Assertive store image and the corresponding impression management tactics

Store Image	IM Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic
Assertive	Transfer agency prior to the occurrence of an unsuccessful delivery	Providing details on delivery options; Dispensing advice and reminders; Issuing disclaimers and warnings
	Appear bureaucratic towards product returns	Stating multiple stipulated criteria for product returns and exchanges

5.3.4.1 Impression Management Tactic 8: Transfer of Agency Prior to Failed Delivery

As shipping remains one of the most crucial yet problematic steps in the e-commerce process, online retailers took great effort in communicating their shipping options, fees, duration and risk to potential buyers, so as to avert challenges of failed deliveries by customers. The majority of online retailers displayed assertiveness towards disclaiming responsibility over failed deliveries. Retailers provided multiple shipping options followed by detailed explanations on each option on the Delivery/Shipping section of the websites to let buyers exercise their choice and in turn conceded the liability of the outcome. Online retailers worked around the shipping challenge to facilitate buyers to reach an informed decision by offering a variety of shipping options (with the exception of NL_STORE and LL_STORE), explained each option in detail, and gave gentle warnings and disclaimers. Once buyers had chosen a shipping option, retailers deemed they are discharged of further responsibility regarding outcomes in shipping. Agency is transferred to the buyer, who would have assumed implicit responsibility over their decision. The rationale for adopting this IM tactic is illustrated by Retailer DI in her quote, which provided an insight into her decision to give buyers choices to select their preferred delivery modes:

> I thought about this before. Should I make all my delivery registered mail? Or I give people the option? That again is also fair practice by telling upfront: [What] I post to you is not registered mail [and] you don't get tracking service. But if it gets lost, I'm not responsible for it because I had already posted it out. So the onus is on you as a buyer to decide. Do you want registered mail? If you want, you can purchase it. You have an option.

GT_STORE is an example of an online store that provided the varied choices and detailed explanations of each option in terms of delivery costs, expected shipping turnaround time, and parcel tracking. On its website were five options for local delivery (i.e. Local mail, Local registered mail, Saver, Flexi, and Guaranteed), and four options for international delivery (i.e. SingPost Airmail, SpeedPost Standard, SpeedPost Economy and DHL). The options were presented in order of increasing delivery fees. Local non-registered mail service was the most affordable as it does not incur additional postage cost and hence

GT_STORE will not take responsibility for mail that is lost in transit. Local registered mail comes with tracking but requires a top-up of S$2.24 per order. Saver delivery is GT_STORE's in-house delivery service and is deemed the most economical and reliable option. Flexi and Guaranteed delivery options are the costliest as they cater to customers who request for a specific date and time to receive the package. Flexi delivers requires within two working days while Guaranteed Delivery can be scheduled on the same day as the receipt of order. The four options for international shipping on GT_STORE are equally detailed as the domestic delivery choices.

Non-registered mail being the cheapest option is also the riskiest since it does not offer any tracking capability. Stores appear firm and unrelenting when refusing to be held responsible for lost mail. For example, in the following quote, Retailers ES shares:

> Lost mail is something that poses challenges to us. That's why we have very clear terms and conditions on our website that if you opt for normal mail, there's risk, and we are not liable for any lost mail in such circumstances. We always encourage customers to opt for registered mail.

Retailers display disclaimers and warnings in red and bold on websites to highlight the risk of lost packages to buyers who select the cheapest delivery mode. JE_STORE highlights their message in red and bold: "Please note that all out going packages are not registered and would advise to have it registered. We will not be responsible for any lost mails or packaging." DI_STORE makes a similar disclaimer: "Packages lost/stolen/damaged during shipment/handling by the postal service is beyond my control. I regret that I will not be able to take responsibility for shipments lost/stolen/damaged or delayed due to incorrect/insufficient information provided by the customer." PL_STORE reminds customers that they "will not be responsible for lost packages that are sent via non-registered mail". MR_STORE offers free local, non-registered delivery for purchases below S$50 but states in the Terms of Sales that: "For all orders below S$50 in Singapore, the Seller shall send all Products by local standard mail at its own cost but shall not be liable if the Product(s) is not delivered."

Besides loss of unregistered packages, missed delivery of registered mail is another type of unsuccessful delivery. Registered mail incurs a slight inconvenience to buyers who find it troublesome to make arrangements to sign the package at the time it is delivered to their homes. Retailer DI reminds her customers on her store policy page that both the registered mail and express shipping courier services would require it to be signed upon receipt. Stating such requirements of the delivery provider upfront on the retailer's website would help in managing the expectations of buyers who are new to online shopping. DI_STORE's store policy read: "If you require tracking information, please purchase Registered Mail Service. The shipment is delivered to your doorstep and needs to be signed for."

Only two retailers in this study did not offer buyers shipping options but a default-shipping mode. One offered free local shipping while the other charges a flat rate. In the quote below Retailer NL explained that her decision of specifying a flat fee upfront helps to minimise carts being abandoned:

> I was looking at the different reasons that shopping carts are abandoned. It turns out that uncertainty about delivery costs is one of the things that make people abandoned shopping carts because they just try and buy something to see how much the delivery would be. So now, we actually try to put more information about what the delivery costs are upfront so that they don't have to go through that abandonment process.

The majority of consumer participants agreed with the retailers that the buyer is responsible for lost packages if they opted for non-registered mail. For example, Consumer PK commented: "generally the buyer is liable for lost mail". Consumers, however, are divided on whether retailers are partially responsible for lost mail. Nearly half of the consumer responses indicated sellers' responsibility while the other half think otherwise. For example, Consumers AF and SW pointed out that shipping is sometimes beyond the control of the online stores. Other consumers held higher customer expectations. For example, Consumer DF expected "some kind of service delivery" while Consumer AF viewed companies that are "able to make good" as reputable.

5.3.4.2 Impression Management Tactic 9: Appear Bureaucratic towards Product Returns

Finally, the analysis revealed retailers' assertive attitude towards refunds, returns and exchanges. On the retail websites surveyed, Terms and Conditions, Terms of Sales or Frequency Asked Questions suggested the extent retailers attempt to discourage returned purchases from buyers. For example, DI_STORE's advice to buyers was: "Please read the product description and check the images of the items you wish to purchase to ensure the items are what you want."

The majority of retail stores were silent about offering refunds. In their Terms and Conditions page, SJ_STORE stated that: "All sales are final and are not exchangeable or refundable." IS_STORE, which sells hair care products, explained the reason why they do not accept the exchange of goods: "Due to the nature of products we carry, for hygiene reasons, we cannot accept exchange of goods". AL_STORE does not accept refunds for customers' request to cancel orders once items were packed for delivery, but Retailer AL clarified that she may accept returns "on a case-to-case basis". Rarely did stores mention about refund upfront on their websites, except for AS_STORE, AC_STORE and PC_STORE, which indicated that refunds would be issued via a company cheque or through "credit card or original method of payment".

In relation to return or exchange policies, retail stores stipulated stringent criteria to be fulfilled. One such criteria was the physical condition of the product upon the customer's receipt and upon its return to the retailer. The reasons accepted by online store to qualify for a refund or exchange, include manufacturer defects (AC_STORE, DC_STORE, DI_STORE, GT_STORE, PL_STORE and VK_STORE), the goods being "reasonably damaged" (ES_STORE and MR_STORE), or "damaged" (AL_STORE, PC_STORE, RH_STORE and PT_STORE). Only AL_STORE attempted to define damaged items as having "broken safety seal, cracked container and broken glass" and excludes dents and scratches. Other than defects and damages, a few online stores accepted returns if the product was "different from what was ordered", "different from what was described on the website" (MR_STORE), or was due to the seller's error (AC_STORE), or where "sizing defers from expectation" (PL_STORE).

Another criterion for buyers to meet was the store's bureaucratic return procedure. Online stores that accepted product returns typically required the buyer to inform the store of the intent to return, to return the product within three to fifteen working days, and to produce the proof of purchase from the store, such as an original invoice. The greatest deterrent to many consumers was the requirement that buyers have to bear the shipping costs when returning the item to the store for refund or exchange. For example, Retailers AC, AL, AS, ES, GT and LL specifically reminded customers on their Delivery pages to send the package back to the store at the buyers' expense, and to "pay the shipping charge to re-ship the package" for exchange cases (AL_STORE).

Online retailers communicated their store rules regarding refunds, returns and exchanges on their websites in an effort to avert unjustified redress attempts by customers who might be viewed as taking advantage of the stores' lenient policies. For example, Retailer LL revealed that there are customers who "just want the money back [..] after trying for some months, or even some days", reflecting a mindset which is prevalent in the U.S. due to the 'no questions asked' return policy offered by major retail stores. Conversely, the store policies of online retail stores in Singapore generally included conditional returns. For example, although GT_STORE's policy used the words "no questions asked", refunds are assessed based on the condition "that [items] are fully sealed and are in the same conditioned as received within 7 days".

To online retailers, store policies served an important role in communicating their expectation of the reasonableness of the customers' behaviour, especially during times when conflicts may potentially arise. One retailer, DI, conveyed how publishing her store policy has helped her to inform buyers of the means to resolve situations that could possibly went wrong during the online purchase in the quote below.

> I think it is important to put your store policies upfront. For me as an online shop, I need to make my store policies clear. If you buy from me, as long as the purchase is completed, it means you have accepted all these policies. It's not contractual but as far as possible, you're a reasonable buyer, I'm a reasonable seller, I told you upfront that these are my policies. So, I think that's fair too, so that before people buy from you, they understand if something goes wrong, how does it get rectified.

Consumer participants were unanimous regarding the difficulty of returning or exchanging of purchased items. Half of them cited the reason that buyers had to pay for the return shipping fees. For example, Consumer MG noted that retailers "provide so many Ts and Cs that they are actually not encouraging you to return. They are trying to put you off". Others mentioned the requirement to "return within seven days" (Consumer PK), the "need to find time to send parcel to post office" (Consumer SW), and the difficulty to prove that "the item has a manufacturer's defect" (Consumer MH). Still others perceived the request for return or exchange may be difficult as "the seller will give a lot of reasons for rejecting the exchange" (Consumer KT) and it was ultimately "subjected to the opinion of the seller" (Consumer AF).

In summary, the findings suggested four store images were projected by the deployment of nine impression management tactics, as illustrated in Table 20. Consumers' responses to each of the tactics are summarised in Table 21. The results of the analysis suggested that out of the four images, an assertive image could be most effectively portrayed as consumers reacted to both IM tactics of transferring agency and appearing bureaucratic as expected (see Table 22). Consumers' mixed reactions to the IM tactics supporting the other three images (reputable, legitimate and trustworthy) suggest these images might not be persuasively communicated to consumers.

Table 20: Summary of store images and impression management tactics used by online retailers

Store Image	Impression Management (IM) Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic	Information Tactic Used	Example
Reputable	Emphasise high quality and/or de-emphasise average or low quality	Highlight of awards and product certifications	Visual amplification	A retailer displays the awards won for “best one-stop shop for nursing needs” on every single webpage
		Compelling product descriptions	Language exaggeration, Figurative reinterpretation	A retailer describes her bags as “a little slice of heaven”
		Professional product photography	Visual amplification	A retailer displays high-resolution photographs of the products that allows zooming-in for closer examination
		Full disclosure of favourable attributes while partial disclosure of unfavourable attributes	Selective disclosure	A retailer provides detailed description of the ingredients in organic products but only a brief description of non-organic products
	Emulate the professionalism of large retailers’ websites	Full page display of products	Visual amplification	To give the impression of large assortment, the home page of a retailer is filled with products displayed in several different categories
		Adoption of big box retailers’ web design	Visual amplification	Retailers present a home page that is professionally designed with animated sliders and attractive photographs

Store Image	Impression Management (IM) Tactic	Illustration of IM Tactic	Information Tactic Used	Example
Legitimate	Disclose seller's identity	Provision of multiple means of contacting the retailer; Reveal faces and names behind the store	Selective disclosure	Retailers provide email address, phone numbers, online chat and address of physical stores, where available
	Draw attention to online social relations	Placement of links, feeds and widgets on website to social media fan page	Visual amplification	A retailer embeds the Facebook 'Facepile' widget on its homepage showing its following of fans
Trustworthy	Proclaim commitment to privacy promises	Lengthy privacy policy that explains the actions taken towards the protection of consumer privacy	Extensive elaboration	One of the longest privacy policy on a retailer's website contains 1,920 words
	Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment	Communication of delivery time duration, regular updates on order processing status and delivery tracking	Selective disclosure	A retailer provides estimated delivery time for each mode of delivery – in-house, domestic and international
	Appeal to institutional trust in electronic payment security	Display of symbols of trusted affiliates (such as PayPal)	Visual amplification	Retailers typically display PayPal logo to indicate acceptance of electronic payment on their stores
Assertive	Transfer agency prior to the occurrence of failed delivery	Provision of options for delivery, advice, reminders, disclaimers and warnings	Extensive elaboration, Selective disclosure	Retailers give buyers several delivery options and at the same time issue disclaimers about non-responsibility over lost packages
	Appear bureaucratic towards product returns	Multiple stipulated criteria for product exchanges or returns	Extensive elaboration	Retailers typically only accept exchanges or returns if it is due to manufacturer defects, or if the product is reasonably damaged.

Table 21: Summary of consumers' responses to the 9 IM tactics

IM Tactics	Consumer Responses	Comments
1. Emphasise and de-emphasise product quality	Consumers generally agreed that awards and detailed descriptions gave them an impression of good product quality.	The IM tactic of placing emphasis on product quality appears to impress consumers.
2. Emulate big retailers	There was mixed feedback about whether the look-and-feel of an online store's homepage is a tell-tale sign of its reputation and size.	The effect of this IM tactic is debatable.
3. Strategically disclose seller identity	Consumers do not necessarily think that disclosing personal information about the seller makes them appear more authentic.	Seller disclosure does not appear to be useful.
4. Draw attention to online social relationships	The majority of consumer participants mentioned they trusted an online store that is active on social media.	Online social acceptance seems to be a viable IM tactic.
5. Proclaim commitment in consumer privacy protection	Consumer participants were of the opinion that a privacy policy is essential for e-commerce stores. On reading the contents of the privacy policy, half do not read while the rest either browse through quickly or read selectively.	This could be an effective IM tactic.
6. Proclaim commitment in order fulfilment	Consumers expect stores to inform them of the estimated delivery time and generally hold positive opinions of stores that do so.	This IM tactic could be useful.
7. Appeal to institutional trust in electronic payment security	The responses of consumer participants seemed to be polarised. A third reported positive impressions with PayPal or stores that use PayPal, while another third expressed contradictory viewpoints. The rest were neutral.	This tactic does not appear to be able to persuade consumers.
8. Transfer agency prior to failed delivery	The majority of consumer participants agreed with the retailers that the buyer is responsible for lost packages if they opted for non-registered mail. Consumers, however, are divided on whether retailers are partially responsible for lost mail.	It seems that retailers are able to transfer agency to buyers, but they may not be totally free from the responsibility to deliver.
9. Appear bureaucratic towards product returns	Consumer participants were unanimous regarding the difficulty of returning or exchanging of purchased items.	Appearing bureaucratic seems to be the most effective IM tactic.

Table 22: IM tactics that support the portrayal of store images based on consumer responses

Store Image	IM Tactic	Likelihood of consumers reacting to the IM tactic	Whether IM tactic supports the portrayal of store image
Reputable	1. Emphasise and de-emphasise product quality	Likely	Uncertain if a reputable image can be portrayed as desired
	2. Emulate big retailers	Unlikely	
Legitimate	3. Strategically disclose seller identity	Unlikely	Uncertain if a legitimate image can be portrayed as desired
	4. Draw attention to social relationships	Likely	
Trustworthy	5. Proclaim commitment in consumer privacy protection	Likely	May support the portray of a trustworthy image
	6. Proclaim commitment in order fulfilment	Likely	
	7. Appeal to institutional trust in electronic payment security	Unlikely	
Assertive	8. Transfer agency prior to failed delivery	Likely	Most likely to support the portrayal of an assertive image
	9. Appear bureaucratic towards product returns	Likely	

5.4 Minor Finding on Entrepreneurial Motivation

Retailers' accounts of how important they viewed their e-businesses and the future directions for the online store context serves as a reflection of their willingness to invest effort into managing public impressions of their stores. The analysis was based on retailers' responses to questions that asked them to recall the objectives of starting the online business, how they run the business and their plans for the future.

The analysis identified three perceptions of retailers towards their e-businesses:

1. As a part-time, sideline business
2. As an extension to their core business
3. As a means to increase profitability

The first group of retailers who started their online stores as a home-based business are mainly stay-at-home mothers and caregivers to their young children. Commonly known as 'mompreneurs', these retailers operated from the comfort of their homes to sell hobby craft, children books, or skincare products. They appeared to be less concerned about achieving high profitability through their online stores. Rather than seeing themselves as ambitious business entrepreneurs, a few retailers associated themselves with the primary roles they held in life, for example, a housewife or a counsellor. They appeared to be less business-minded, and less like profiteering merchants. Others downplayed profiteering as a secondary priority and preferred to place greater emphasis on work-life balance instead of aggressively chasing after sales.

A second group of retailers are entrepreneurs operating retail shops prior to being online. To this group, the online store is merely an extension to their core business, such as wholesale distribution. Retailers' responses suggested that an online presence merely compliments an existing dominant sales channel. Retailers shared that they did not expect an online presence to contribute greatly to the firm's overall bottom line. They viewed the Internet as a platform to promote their brand awareness.

A third group of retailers regarded the e-business as a contributor to the overall profit margin. For storeowners who had started off as a wholesale distributer with a retail presence, an online presence provides the wholesaler direct exposure of their product offerings to a wider customer base and eliminates the retail intermediary, leaving a bigger profit margin for the store.

When asked about their future plans, retailers expressed three different outlooks – being uncertain, conservative and ambitious. A few retailers hinted at the possibility of closing down their e-business in the future. A bookseller appeared most pessimistic when he predicted that the big players in the industry will eventually force his local book business out of the market due to intense competition and high cost of operations.

Most retailers shared conservative, small-scale plans involving the expansion of their existing product offerings in their online store. For example, Retailer MR intended to expand their book merchandise and genres of books. Another retailer in lifestyle goods intended to widen her product offering, but she was mindful of the potential hurdles of achieving a desired level of sales before adding on new products. Other retailers had plans to develop a brand new web store or upgrade the existing website.

Ambitious retailers drew longer-term plans, which include growing their firms from an online business to a brick-and-mortar retail outlet, expanding and setting up a franchise in neighbouring South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia and Philippines.

In summary, retailers were motivated in different ways towards the operation of their online business. They had different views regarding the importance of their e-businesses. The degree of importance ranged from low (that is, only a sideline job) to moderate (which complements existing channels) to high (which contributes to profit margin). Retailers' opinions on the outlook of their stores ranged from pessimistic (for example, winding up the business) to moderately positive (for example, enlarging the existing product offering) to optimistic (for example, seeking to conquer new markets).

5.5 Summary

The research examined the way participants present information on their retail websites. It investigated what information is disclosed and not disclosed, and how the disclosed information is presented and communicated to portray the desired store images. The key findings revealed that retailers use fours strategic actions and six information tactics to present information on their website. Further, the nine impression management tactics could be utilized to project four store images. Reputable, legitimate and trustworthy store images are persuasive while an assertive image is deemed as protective. An online store that portrayed all four store images would be considered as having an impressionist web façade. A store projecting three or fewer images is on the other hand, a minimalist. A minor finding suggested the retailers in this study can be generally classified according to their motivation in operating the e-business and the future plans for the stores.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

6.1 Chapter Introduction

This study posited that online retailers leverage opportunities for impression management on their retail websites by strategically managing information that portrays them favourably. To substantiate the argument, this chapter presents a dramaturgical model of impression management of online retail stores. The model emerged from examining how online retailers manage and present information on websites to create idealized images of the store. These store images differ from the actual representation of a small business operating behind the scene. By leveraging information actions, information tactics and impression management tactics, this thesis explains how an under-resourced retailer can build a façade that attracts prospective customers while asserting the store's rights to buyers.

Before expounding the dramaturgical model, the chapter begins by redefining the language of dramaturgy in the context of online retail in a virtual marketing environment. Next, the chapter shows how the various components of the model work together to enact a web façade. Building on the previous chapter's explanations of how the impression management tactics are used in an e-commerce context to foster store images, this chapter draws parallels between the existing literatures. In addition, the chapter demonstrates the ways in which the information actions corroborate and differ from the B2C information transparency research framework (Granados et al., 2010). The main aim of this chapter is to provide an enriched understanding of impression management on retail websites through a dramaturgical lens.

6.2 Redefining the Language of Dramaturgy in the e-Commerce Context

Given that the theatrical metaphor Goffman (1959) used in his dramaturgical model assumes a face-to-face human-to-human interaction, the language surrounding the description of an e-commerce interaction, that is the virtual interaction between the web visitor and a retail website, needs redefinition. Social interaction in everyday life, according to Goffman (1959), is likened to individuals performing on a stage. A front region is where the actor is on the stage in front of an audience, and a corresponding backstage exists in the absence of the audience. In the e-commerce context, the performer is the retailer mediated by the retail website, which interacts with the audience, who are the web visitors. Only the audience (web visitor) can initiate the interaction, and when initiated, the website begins its 'performance'. The performance occurs on the stage, in this case, the computer screen, with the audience sitting in front and having full control of viewing selective parts of the performance as well as ending the show. The web design of the site parallels the way the stage is setup, which includes considerations for functional usage (such as navigation structure) and symbolic appeal (such as aesthetics). While the retail website represents the front region, the backstage belongs to the retailer's and is reserved for the preparation of information prior to publishing publicly on the Internet. The key concepts in dramaturgy are adapted for use in the e-commerce context as illustrated in Table 23, which shows a comparison between Goffman's definition of terms and those derived from this study.

Table 23: Comparison of terminology used by Goffman and those adapted for this study

Key concepts in dramaturgy	**Face-to-face physical interaction (Goffman, 1959)**	**Virtual interaction in an e-shopping environment (This study)**
Interaction or encounter	"the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence" (p. 26) Also referred to as "a dialogue between the performer and audience or observer (p.97)	Refers to the activity in which reciprocal actions are initiated by the audience (web visitor) and the attempted influence by the performer (retailer mediated by a website). In the online shopping context, the encounter is essentially a human-computer interaction.
Performance	"all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way of the other participants" (p. 26).	Refers to all activities on the website that influences the audience (web visitor) in any way. The audience (web visitor) controls what he wishes to view, but is limited by what the performer (website) has to offer.
Region	"any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (p. 109) "the expressive equipment.. employed by the individual during his performance" (p. 32)	Same as Goffman's definition
Front region	"the place where the performance is given" (p. 110)	Same as Goffman's definition
Back region or backstage	"a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 114)	Refers to the offline working space where the performance is designed and scripted which may represent a 'work-in-progress' state rather than the finished state when it is finally published on the website.
Setting	"the scenic parts of expressive equipment" (p. 34) "involves furniture, décor, physical layout and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (pp. 32-33)	Involves the web design of the site, taking into consideration functional (utilitarian) and symbolic (hedonic) factors. Examples of functional factors are site structure and navigation. An example of a symbolic factor is web atmospherics, such as the use of graphics, animation and colours.

6.3 Dramaturgical Model of Impression Management by Online Retail Stores

The thesis proposed a dramaturgical model of online impression management utilized by retail websites (see Figures 8 and 9). Two regions are delineated in the dramaturgical model segregating the activities between information preparation and information presentation. The backstage region is reserved for retailers' decision making on information disclosure, which involved the shaping of information tactics and the framing of impression management tactics. The storefront region is where the virtual performance of activities aimed at impressing web visitors occurs. This section discusses the three steps that are undertaken in dramaturgically managing consumers' impressions by online retailers of small e-businesses.

Step 1: Actions shape information tactics, and information tactics frame impression management tactics

The first step in dramaturgically managing impression consists of applying strategic transparency actions to web information categories. Four types of actions can be applied to information categories: reveal, conceal, dramatise or selectively disclose. An information category is a broad classification of information on a website to which a firm can utilise as part of its competitive transparency strategies (Granados et al., 2010). Each of these four actions modifies the information transparency of the elements prior to being displayed on the websites. The extent of revealing information, whether extensively, selectively or sparingly, resulted in varying degrees of transparency. Therefore, strategic transparency actions shaped information tactics into varying degrees of information transparency. An example of a reveal approach is the tactic of extensive elaboration that provides high transparency, while at the other end is the complete omission tactic, which is a conceal approach representing high opaqueness.

Strategic actions are capable of shaping web information into information tactics in various ways. Applying the action 'reveal' on store policies such as privacy policy, shipping policy and return policy led to three corresponding information tactics that elaborates, highlights and emphasises these policies respectively. Dramatizing information about products exaggerates product descriptions while dramatizing design of the website represents retailers' attempt to present a sophisticated web front. In between revelation and concealment is the choice for selective disclosure of information. Retailers could disclose information about themselves, delivery policy, payment policy, and social media sharing, not in its entirety, but to an extent they are comfortable with. Finally, the 'conceal' action could be applied to any information category although this study has found that it is most applicable to privacy policy. The ‘conceal’ action did not have any corresponding information tactic, as the findings did not show any information category totally omitted by retailers. Figure 6 illustrates the application of a set of strategic actions on web information categories.

Step 2: Impression management tactics project desired store images

The second step in dramaturgically managing impression consists of projecting the intended store images and web façade. Impressions could be fostered through a mix of explicit expressions conveyed on the retail websites (for example, in the form of store policies) and implicit expressions communicating unspoken and unwritten intent. Information tactics represented explicit expressions while impression management tactics constituted the implicit expressions targeted at influencing consumers’ impressions of the store.

Impression management tactics were derived from information tactics in the following ways. Retailers exaggerated product description in an attempt to emphasise product quality. By presenting a sophisticated web design, small sellers wished to emulate the websites of larger big-box retailers to appear reputable. Revealing information about the seller and multiple means of contact suggested that retailers are willingly disclosing their identity to enable verification. Additionally, engaging in social networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram drew attention to the store’s postings, the following of fans, and the conversations the store had with followers, thereby enhancing legitimacy of the online store. The information tactic of conveying delivery and tracking expectations provided retailers a means of proclaiming their commitment to order fulfilment. The explanation of the availability of secured e-payment mechanisms is intended to appeal to consumer’s trust in established escrow service providers such as PayPal. Building on the trustworthy image is retailers’ extensive policy elaboration on consumer data privacy, thereby indicating their commitment towards the protection of consumer rights. Retailers also highlighted selected parts of the shipping and return policies to ensure important messages support the assertive image they wished to convey. Figure 6 shows the framing of information tactics into impression management tactics and its corresponding image.

Step 3: Projected store images corresponding to two facets

Store images could be sculpted through the purposeful designing of impression management tactics to achieve dispositional enhancements and situational aversions. The images of being reputable, legitimate and trustworthy enhance the personality of the retail store (Martineau, 1958) and were deemed persuasive in fostering a favourable impression. The persuasive facet relied primarily on the actions to dramatise and disclose information selectively, and to a smaller extent, the action to reveal. By dramatizing product information, the neutral was made to look attractive and the positive was made to appear more positive than it possibly is. Colour descriptions are neutral by themselves but were made to appear more interesting. For example, sugar melon was used to describe red nail polish. Superlative adjectives were used to elevate product attribute to the highest. For example, "quality products at affordable pricing" was paired with the word "cheapest" in one retail website. By strategically selecting information to publish on their websites, retailers ensured that only favourable information was disclosed while omitting potentially contentious details. In an example, a retailer emphasised all natural ingredients in an organic skincare product while intentionally excluding chemical laden ingredients in another non-organic product. When revealing information to persuade, retailers tend to over reveal. For example, privacy policies on retail websites were often lengthy and cluttered; although retailers believed that the mere presence of a privacy policy was more important than its length and contents.

Contrary to being persuasive, a protective facet portrayed an assertive image that served to avoid post-purchase situations where customers' demands may led to conflicts. Aversion to potential conflicts helped to preserve the store's reputation. The protective facet relied only the action to reveal information. Disclaimers on shipping failures and deterrents to product returns were such examples. While the persuasive and protective facets served two different purposes, they coexisted without contradiction on retail websites. The next section discusses the two facets in detail.

Besides considering the characteristics of the store images, the number of images projected suggests a different kind of impression as well. This thesis proposed a web façade for online stores that represents the virtual storefront, depending on the number of store images projected. That is to say, the extent of store images projected determined the type of web facade portrayed. Stores that project a few images (two or three) were considered as minimalist, while the portrayal of all four images would suggest an impressionist store.

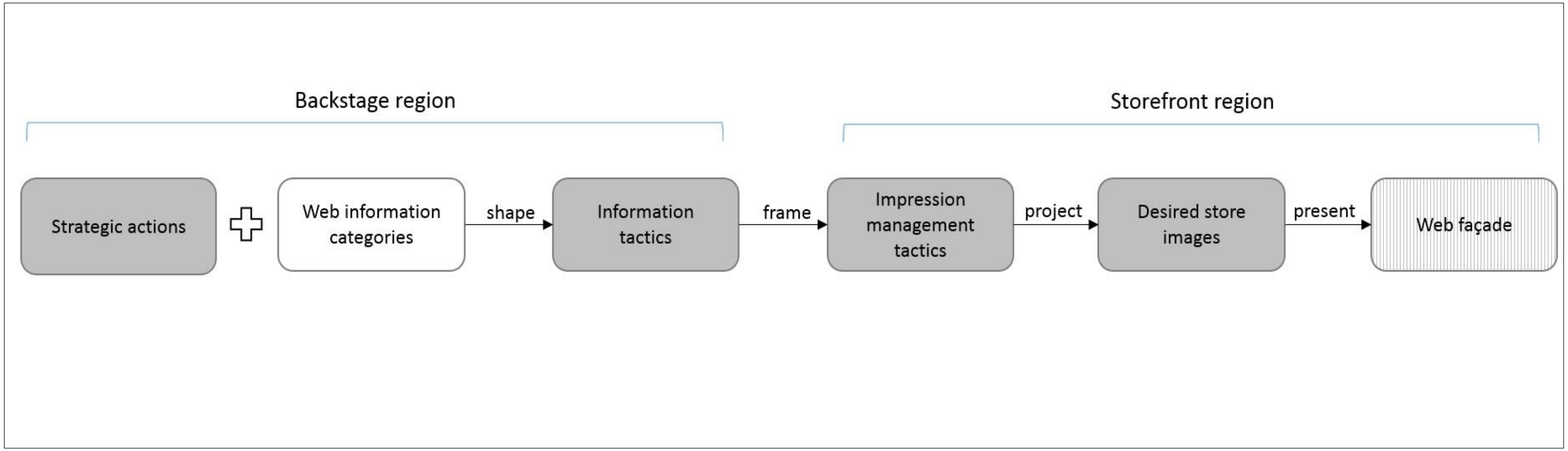

Figure 8: A dramaturgical model of impression management by online retail stores

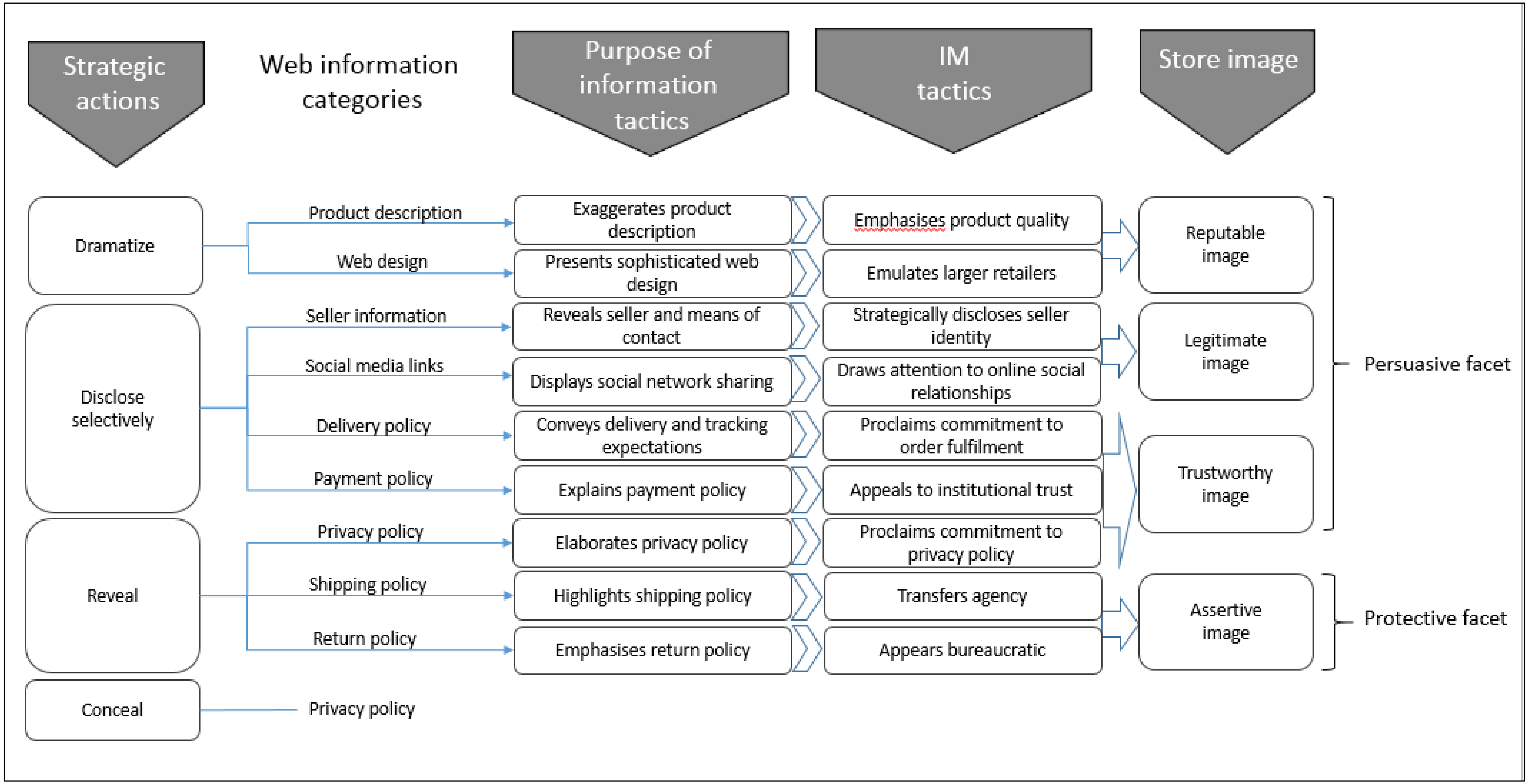

Figure 9: Detailed workings of the dramaturgical model

6.4 Persuasive and Protective Facets of the Dramaturgical Model

Inductively derived from iterative data analysis, the dramaturgical model of impression management by retail websites is made up of two facets - a persuasive facet that serves to impress consumers into making purchases with the store, as well as a protective facet that averts potential challenges from customers. The persuasive facet of the model complemented extant marketing literature that heavily emphasised on the persuasive appeal of websites (e.g. Chu, Deng & Chuang, 2014; Kim & Fesenmaier, 2008; Winn & Beck, 2002). Fulfilling the fundamental purpose of website marketing, the persuasive facet attracted the web visitor to buy through the portrayal of three store images – reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness. Its intended effect is relatively immediate at the pre-purchase phase as the purpose is to impress. The findings from this research also suggested a protective facet that served to deter buyers from challenging sellers during the post-purchase phase. The effect of the protective facet was intended to influence the future behaviour of buyers. While the persuasive facet dominated during the pre-purchase phase, the protective facet took over once the shopping process progresses to the post-purchase phase (see Table 24). This supported the theorization from a marketing perspective that firms used different communication styles to achieve desired purchase outcomes and to offset negative impact resulting from a crisis (Young, Gardner, & Gilbert, 1994). The potential crisis for the online retailer was the challenges posed by the buyer in the event of failed deliveries or product returns, refunds and exchanges.

Table 24: Facets and store images portrayed at each purchase phase

	Persuasive facet	**Protective facet**
Store Image	Reputable Legitimate Trustworthy	Assertive
Effect	Current / immediate during the pre-purchase phase	Future During the post-purchase phase

6.4.1 Portraying the Persuasive Facet

The findings suggested that online stores used persuasive IM tactics during the pre-purchase phase to shape the impression of potential buyers that the stores are reputable, legitimate and trustworthy. The pre-purchase phase embodied the seller's active pursuit of customers (Prus, 1989). It is during this pursuit that marketing communications parallel impression management effort (Fisk & Grove, 1996) to attract, convince and persuade the web visitor to browse the retail site, add items to the shopping cart and subsequently pay for the checkout items. Abundant opportunities therefore exist for impression management in all aspects of marketing communication activities (Fisk & Grove, 1996), and retailers could employ persuasion tactics to influence consumers' perception of the store. Attempts to influence consumers' impressions of the store's reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness were directed towards the end goal of persuading consumers to purchase. Indeed, persuasion theories play a central role in marketing communications (Shimp & Andrews, 2012). Shaping the image of the store through persuasion is of utmost importance to any e-business since consumers' online purchase intentions have been associated with online store image (Chang & Tseng, 2013; Chen & Teng, 2013; Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009).

6.4.1.1 A Reputable Store Image

Projecting a reputable store image is part of the persuasive facet in the dramaturgical model. The impression management tactic of emphasising/de-emphasising quality supported the construction of reputation as a desired image. The finding is congruent with reputation literature, which relates reputation to the perception of the firm's ability to produce quality goods (Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, & Sever, 2005). Quality is usually not observable directly by consumers in this context, and as such they rely on extrinsic cues, for example store reputation, to make causal references about the quality and performance of a product (Citrin, Stem, Spangenberg, & Clark, 2003; Thang & Tan, 2003). A highly reputable store is incentivized to sell high-quality products (Shapiro, 1982). This argument stemmed from an economic perspective that reputable firms maintain their reputation by selling high-quality goods (Allen, 1984). As a result, consumers are able to infer the quality of goods of a profit-maximising firm and exercise their choice of patronage (Klein & Leffler, 1981). Firms which sell low quality products will suffer from a bad reputation and eventually exit the market (Klein & Leffler, 1981). Reputation thus plays a role in preventing product quality from deteriorating (Shapiro, 1982). The underlying ability of a store to sell quality products signals a store's reputation (Rindova et al., 2005). The emphasis of product quality by online stores demonstrated their desire to be seen as reputable, although many of them were still striving to achieve recognition in the minds of the local shoppers.

Online stores in this study were less well known and thus they employ impression management tactics that emphasised product quality to boost their store reputation. Since product certifications and awards represented endorsements from accredited bodies and symbolized the firm's capabilities (Rao, 1994), they are used to serve as signals of store quality. In the absence of obvious quality signals, compelling product descriptions and professional product photography are used to impress upon consumers the high quality of products sold by the store. Conversely, low or mediocre quality products were kept away from the limelight to avoid scrutiny or comparison with their high-quality counterparts for obvious reasons. Unfavourable attributes were often omitted, partially or in full, from the descriptions of low quality products, as disclosing lower quality may potentially tarnish the reputation of the retailer. The tactic of emphasizing high quality is equivalent to the enhancement tactic described by Mohamed et al. (1999), which is used when positive traits are less obvious and therefore, need to be highlighted. The de-emphasizing of average quality is an impression management tactic similar to burying (Cialdini, 1989; Mohamed et al., 1999), which worked by obscuring an association with an unfavourable trait.

Placing emphasis on product assortment and variety is another IM tactic that helped to portray a reputable store image. Online stores adopted a grid layout displaying their store products in multiple categories, thus giving the impression of wide product assortment. Marketing research has shown that a collection of broad assortment of items can create a visual presentation that affects the store image of the retailer (Kalyanam, Borle, & Boatwright, 2007). Successful web merchants were able to impress consumers by offering extensive product assortment (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2005), which in turn resulted in customer satisfaction (Evanschitzky, Iyer, Hesse, & Ahlert, 2004). Research in consumer retail behaviour similarly suggested that merchandising or variety in product assortment significantly influences consumers' choice of store to patronise (Thang & Tan, 2003; Van Herpen & Pieters, 2002). Consumers prefer to choose from large assortments that offer a variety of options because it may facilitate a better match of their expectations and available products. A large variety also allows the flexibility of selecting from alternatives (Chernev, 2006). Further, the perception of high variety of an assortment can influence consumers to increase their consumption quantity (Kahn & Wansink, 2004).

A third IM tactic used by small online retailers in this study is having a web presence that emulates big competitors. Small businesses are inherently at a disadvantage when competing with big-name corporations, because consumers tend to trust large firms more, and are more willing to buy from them (Doney & Cannon, 1997). Large firms would have earned the trust of many consumers who have patronized them, by consistently fulfilling its promises to these regular customers. Furthermore, large firms own a larger market share, have a longer history of existence and are expected to continue to stay in business. Consumers would not expect large firms to act dishonestly as they have more to lose than small firms. On the other hand, opportunistic businesses are likely to remain small as they are less likely to be sustainable and would failed to capture market share (Hill, 1990). It is through this calculative process of reasoning and weighing the benefits and consequences that consumers bestowed more trust upon large firms. Therefore, it is necessary for small retailers to manage consumer perceptions of trust through image-enhancing tactics (Doney & Cannon, 1997).

The retail website, being one of the key knowledge assets of the online retailer, is an ideal platform for small businesses to shape consumer impressions of the firm. Online stores in this study presented a professional and well-designed website to project an image of competence comparable to that of large reputable stores. The finding is congruent with the notion in marketing research that the investment a firm makes on its website influences consumers' reputational beliefs about the online seller (Wang, Wing, Yang, & Lai, 2014). Website investment refers to a firm's effort spent on enhancing the store's frontend, such as the use of graphics, colour and font (Kirmani & Wright, 1989). One of the main reason firms invest in building professional websites is that it communicates latent information about the firm's overall performance (Schlosser, White, & Lloyd, 2006). A high-quality website is an observable attribute that can engender trust upon the store. Once engendered, that trust can be generalised and transferred onto other unobservable, back-end areas, for example, order fulfilment (Schlosser et al., 2006). Therefore, by influencing consumers' perception of the store's ability and credibility based on its website investment, online sellers are able to exert significant effect on consumers' trust and purchase intention (Schlosser et al., 2006).

Consumer behaviour studies corroborate research in marketing by showing that buyers infer about a store's reputation based on surface inspection of a website's visual design (Toms & Taves, 2004). Assessing the quality of a website is an important way to understand whether the quality of goods the firm is providing will be satisfactory (S. Kim & Stoel, 2004). A well designed site can signal professionalism by complying with web design standards (Riegelsberger & Sasse, 2002b), such as providing a user-friendly interface that is easy to navigate, interactive and equipped with good search capabilities (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2005). Other than an aesthetically appealing web design, online stores in this study implemented web functionalities that included interactivity (such as online asynchronous chat, zoom feature on product photography), search capabilities and customer account management. A high quality web design is the reason most consumers are attracted to buy from an online store (Liang & Lai, 2002). The impression management tactic of emphasising/de-emphasising quality and variety, as well as presenting a professional web presence, therefore served to influence web visitors of the store's reputation.

6.4.1.2 A Legitimate Store Image

A second store image that is projected as part of the persuasive facet of the model is legitimacy. Legitimacy in the corporate context refers to "a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, value, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Legitimate organisations tend to be perceived as more trustworthy (Suchman, 1995) and receive greater social acceptance (Deephouse & Carter, 2005).

The study's findings suggested online retailers attempted to establish legitimacy through social and physical presence as well as through acceptance by online social communities. In overcoming the anonymity of the virtual selling environment, online sellers chose to reveal part of their identity by disclosing their first names and posting photographs of themselves or with their families. This impression management tactic is synonymous to a class of strategies known as identified as virtual re-embedding, which is based on Giddens' (1990) concept of re-embedding. Virtual re-embedding is about introducing social cues on websites so as to increase social presence in otherwise dis-embedded interactions between the sellers and buyers that are characterised by separation of space and time (Riegelsberger & Sasse, 2002b). Social presence theory posits that the inherent quality in a communication medium is social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Yoo & Alavi, 2001). One perspective of social presence theory is concerned with the presence of warmth, contact and sensitivity in human relations, and is especially relevant to address the impersonal nature of communication in e-commerce interactions (Hassanein & Head, 2007).

Photographs, are embedded on websites, in particular on the 'About Us' page, to heighten the perception of social presence of the online retailers. This is consistent with Gefen and Straub's (2004) assertion that photographs containing people helps to convey a sense of human touch and in turn creates the perception of social presence. The visual cues in photographs provide the basis for social judgment and impression formation (Bacharach & Gambetta, 2001). Photographs serve to convey the disposition of an individual and give an indication of a sense of honesty and trustworthiness (Bente, Baptist, & Leuschner, 2011). The significance of trustworthiness in a virtual environment is that firms that are considered as trustworthy are more likely to be accorded with dispositional legitimacy, which is associated with the perceived persona of a firm (Suchman, 1995).

Photographs, however, should be used with caution, as studies have shown mixed results of displaying photographs. For example, Riegelsberger and Sasse (2002a) suggest that the ill-considered use of photographs as a social and affective cue can lead to decreased trustworthiness as consumers may perceive as trust manipulating attempts. Other studies, such as Riegelsberger, Sasse, and McCarthy (2003) has shown that photographs have no effect on online trust in general.

A second impression management tactic to build legitimacy is to augment social presence with physical existence. Bricks-and-clicks stores in this study prominently displayed the addresses of their shops, location maps and operating hours. Other stores had included by-appointment showrooms, or office address that hinted at a sense of permanence of the store. The association of an online store with a physical shop was found to increase consumer's reported intention to buy as institution-based trust can be transferred from the traditional shopping channel to the web-based store (K. J. Stewart, 2003). According to Teo and Liu (2007), the physical presence of a brick-and-mortar shop increases consumers' confidence in a web store. Further, the provision of multiple means of contact, such as email, telephone number, web chat, online feedback form, and Skype by online retailers is consistent with Teo and Liu's (2007) idea of multi-channel interaction that gives consumers the flexibility and choice in accessing product and service information via a channel they prefer.

Online stores attempted to build consequential legitimacy by drawing attention to the store's social acceptance by a large group of followers on social media networks. According to legitimacy theory (Suchman, 1995), organisations are judged by their accomplishments. Online stores that achieved a big following of fans on social media may signal consequential legitimacy. A large following of social media fans cannot be achieved overnight since its organic growth takes time, an online store with a bigger fan base may be perceived as more legitimate. Garnering societal support is a way to narrow the legitimacy gap between how a firm wishes to be perceived and how in reality it is (Campbell, 2000).

6.4.1.3 A Trustworthy Store Image

A large part of the persuasive facet of the model came from the projection of a trustworthy store image. A trustworthy image is critically important to the online retailer, as it has been anchored as the central tenet of consumers' purchase decisions. Literature on organisation trust defines trustworthiness as the characteristic of a party that inspires confidence in another (Caldwell & Clapham, 2003; Kharouf, Lund, & Sekhon, 2014). In the online retailing context, trustworthiness is often related to the marketer's reliability in protecting customers' private information and his integrity in using the information (Belanger, Hiller, & Smith, 2002). Privacy is in fact one the most influential determinant of trust for online retailers (Bart, Shankar, Sultan, & Urban, 2005).

Online stores proclaimed their commitment to privacy promises by dedicating a section of their website to publishing privacy notices. The study's findings about online retailers making known promises towards privacy safeguards to build a trustworthy image is consistent with studies that suggest promises can build trust in relationships (Butler & Cantrell, 1984; Schniter, Sheremeta, & Sznycer, 2013). Promises help to develop consumer confidence that expected obligations will be fulfilled (Butler & Cantrell, 1984). Trust researchers argued that establishing a trustworthy image is essential before a trusting relationship can be built (Kharouf et al., 2014). When managing consumer information, building trust through improving store image and reputation was found to be a more effective approach than attempting to reduce consumer concerns (Milne & Boza, 1999).

Smith, Dinev, and Xu (2011) suggest building trust and mitigating privacy fears by explicitly communicating privacy policy and displaying privacy notices. The mere presence of privacy policy is sufficient to persuade users that a firm can be trusted (Pan & Zinkhan, 2006). Prominent display of privacy information on websites was found to lead to consumers being more willing to purchase and pay a premium (Tsai, Egelman, Cranor, & Acquisti, 2011). Specifically, trustworthiness promotes the intention to buy and firms may achieve competitive advantage if they establish trustworthiness as a core component of their image (Büttner & Göritz, 2008). Similarly Bowie and Jamal (2006) argued that firms positioned as trustworthy on privacy dimensions enjoys competitive advantage.

Privacy policies on retail websites in this study were often long, detailed and uninviting to read. This is consistent with Belanger et al.'s (2002) findings that privacy statements on websites vary from well-detailed to being difficult to read. While retailers were encouraged to provide detailed explanations of privacy policies as it promotes trust in new customers (McKnight, Kacmar, & Choudhury, 2004), Internet users were generally less concerned about specific provisions of the policy (Earp & Baumer, 2003). In fact, studies have found that most users do not read before disclosing personal data (Arcand, Nantel, Arles-Dufour, & Vincent, 2007; Vu et al., 2007).

Proclaiming commitment to order fulfilment is another IM tactic used by online retailers to project a trustworthy store image. Fulfilling commitments demonstrates the trustworthiness of a person (Hardin, 2002), and similarly online stores that honour their commitment to fulfil orders portray themselves as trustworthy web merchants. Consumer behaviour studies have shown that order fulfilment has significant effect on inducing online trust (Chang & Fang, 2013), especially in high involvement websites such as online retailers (Bart et al., 2005). This study's findings showed that online retailers manage customers' expectations of goods delivery in three ways. First, the provision of order confirmation is consistent with the finding in Chang and Fang's (2013) study that order confirmation is one key aspect of order fulfilment. Second, sellers' communication of the expected delivery time helped to inform the buyers of the total time lapse between the order placement and the receipt of the goods, which included the dispatch time, shipping time and delivery to the buyer's doorstep (Schaupp & Bélanger, 2005). Third, the provision of a tracking number for registered packages is similar to what Schaupp and Bélanger (2005) has suggested for order shipments. While it is important to honour commitments to order fulfilment, failure to do so can be detrimental as trust can be weakened due to mistakes made in order fulfilment (Shankar, Urban, & Sultan, 2002). Prospect theory explains that losses loom larger than gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and therefore while earning trust on the web is difficult, but losing it is comparatively easy.

Appealing to institutional trust of an established service provider is a third IM tactic to build trustworthiness for the online retailer. Institution trust refers to the beliefs of consumers about the general safety of the web when dealing with transactions (McKnight et al., 2004). In assuring consumers of a secured online payment mechanism which can reduce consumers' perceived risk in disclosing credit card information over the web (Teo & Liu, 2007), many sellers in this study align themselves with PayPal as a trusted affiliate. This finding is consistent with that of transference-based trust building in which firms associate themselves with other businesses that are already trusted by buyers (Stewart, 2003). PayPal is an often preferred e-payment intermediary as it provides mechanisms which are capable of institutional trust building, namely escrow services (that is, "authorizing payments only after the buyer is satisfied”) and credit card guarantees (that is, “recourse provided by financial institutions in case of fraudulent seller behaviour”) (Pavlou & Gefen, 2004, p. 38). Teo and Liu’s (2007) cross-cultural study on Singapore consumers also showed that system assurance, defined as, “the dependability and security of a vendor’s online transaction system” (p. 25), has a strong influence on trust. Offering alternatives to PayPal, such as interbank direct fund transfers, is a common practice by online retailers. This was also suggested by Schaupp and Bélanger (2005).

6.4.2 Portraying the Protective Facet

A second argument presented in this thesis is that online stores used protective IM tactics to avert potential challenges from buyers during the post-purchase phase by projecting an assertive store image. At the post-purchase stage, the consumer has converted from a web visitor into a customer and is awaiting the delivery of the goods. In anticipation of potential challenges that arise during this stage, online retailers replaced the persuasive facet put up during the pre-purchase stage with a protective facet. The protective facet is delivered through the portrayal of an assertive store image.

6.4.2.1 An Assertive Store Image

The findings suggested online retailers adopt an assertive communication style when it came to addressing potential predicaments, such as failed deliveries or buyers seeking redress. Being assertive is defined in psychology literature as acting in one’s best interests, standing up for oneself, expressing honest opinions comfortably, and exercising one’s rights without denying the rights of others (Richins, 1983). Consumer behaviour literature has long shown that assertive consumers exercise their rights more readily in consumer-retailer interactions (Richins & Verhage, 1987). The evidence of assertiveness in retailers in this study showed how the supply side reacted to potential assertiveness from the demand side (i.e. consumers). An assertive style entailed using IM tactics to influence buyers to abandon adverse actions against the store in event of unmet expectations. By portraying an assertive store image, the primary goal was to protect the store’s interests.

The IM tactic of transferring agency prior to failed deliveries, in particular, is a type of excuse tactic (Tedeschi & Riess, 1981) and is anticipatory in nature. It is an attempt to shift responsibility from the seller to the buyer prior to the delivery and subsequently to the logistics service provider should the delivery failed. Sellers perceived their accountability ends after the package left their premises and arrived at the logistics delivery company. This tactic is consistent with Elsbach et al.'s (1998) categorization of anticipatory excuses aimed at attenuating the public's perceptions of an organisation's responsibility for an undesirable event. The transferring of agency from the seller to the buyer could also be viewed as a type of disclaimer tactic (Mohamed et al., 1999; Schlenker, 1980; Tedeschi & Norman, 1985) that the online stores used to, first, define their scope of responsibility to buyers, second, to mitigate their responsibility should a failure in service occur.

The IM tactic used by online retailers to appear bureaucratic to avert buyers seeking product returns is congruent with a class of tactics known as anticipatory obfuscation (Elsbach et al., 1998). By imposing bureaucratic roadblocks for buyers regarding their requests for product returns or exchanges, online retailers obscured the path to consumer redress. This is especially evident when the retailers perceived the buyer's intention is to abuse or take advantage of the return policy. Product returns are inevitably 'part-and-parcel' of the customer service provided by retail business. Although product returns are costly in terms of reverse logistics, lost sales and negative word-of-mouth (Petersen & Kumar, 2009), having a no-returns policy would affect customer satisfaction further (Cassill, 1998; Yuksel, Yuksel, & Kilinc, 2006). Yet, retailers do not want to appear too lenient towards accepting returns, and indeed research on product return paradox have indicated that leniency may not be ideal (Wood, 2001). Leniency indirectly encourages more returns (Davis, Hagerty, & Gerstner, 1998) and customer abuse (Rust, Lemon, & Zeithaml, 2004). Taking the middle ground but towards a more assertive inclination, online stores in this study generally (all except two) adopted a strict non-refundable policy, but accommodated genuine requests for product exchanges due to defects or due to the seller's mistake. Stores that allowed product exchanges (except two stores) anticipated unjustified requests and attempted to minimise these through asserting compliance with the store's stipulated criteria for returns. Online retailers' assertiveness to counter potential unjustified requests supported the notion that service providers tend to reciprocate the assertive behaviour of consumers (Yagil, 2001). Retailers' images of assertiveness is motivated by the anticipation of consumers' assertive behaviour, such as the seeking remedy for dissatisfied purchases and resisting requests for compliance with store's policy (Richins, 1983; Richins & Verhage, 1987).

While online retail stores might not treat product returns as a necessary evil (Petersen & Kumar, 2009), reverse logistics inevitably strained the under-resourced retailers even further. Online retailers did not demonstrate over-assertiveness as it was known to have a negative effect on customer satisfaction (Yagil, 2001). In the hope of winning over happy customers, as expressed by ML_STORE: “We do allow for exchanges [..] as we want you to be happy with your purchases with us”, online stores have to work towards finding that intricate balance between being assertive and accommodative.

6.4.3 Projecting Online Store Images of Reputation, Legitimacy and Trustworthiness

The research examined impression management by online retail stores through the portrayal of store images and the inquiry was approached from the retail stores’ perspective. The aim of the research was to uncover ways in which stores attempted to influence impressions of consumers. This is in contrast with most studies on store image literature, which had predominantly adopted the consumers’ perspective in investigating their subjective perceptions of the store.

This study showed the co-existence of reputable, legitimate, trustworthy and assertive images without contention, and is therefore consistent with what Prus (1989, p. 309) had pointed out, that is, images portrayed by the firm could be inextricably intertwined and “co-exist compatibly in many circumstances”. Further, the store images were intertwined in the sense that impression management tactics that projected a particular image may also led to another image. For example, the presence of social cues, such as the display of photographs (Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008; J. Willis & Todorov, 2006) and physical, real-world existence (Benedicktus, Brady, Darke, & Voorhees, 2010; Seckler, Heinz, Forde, Tuch, & Opwis, 2015) could also foster trust in consumers, besides building legitimacy. Organisation research has also shown that the concepts of reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness are correlated. Both reputation and legitimacy employed similar signals and symbols to create impressions (Rao, 1994). Rao (1994) asserted that reputation is the outcome emerging from a company’s legitimation process. A company’s reputation can in turn induce trust beliefs in consumers (Bente et al., 2011; D. J. Kim, Ferrin, & Rao, 2008; Milne & Boza, 1999).

Of the four store images that emerged from the analysis, the finding on trustworthiness resonated most with the existing store image literature. Trustworthiness has surfaced as a key component of store image and is synonymous to the reliability of the merchant (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004). The trustworthiness of a retailer in his commitment to fulfil privacy promises in this study is consistent with the seller maintaining the confidentiality of the customers’ personal data as demonstrated in the studies by Van der Heijden and Verhagen (2002, 2004). The commitment of the retailer towards order fulfilment is also aligned with the consumers' perception of a reliable seller (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004). Retailers who offered multiple means of electronic payment signals trustworthiness and this finding is similar to another finding which showed the variety of payment choices available to customers (Chen & Teng, 2013; Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004).

The finding that suggested reputation is a one aspect of an online store image in this study is consistent with studies which indicated that reputation is manifested in several store attributes, such as product information, product alignment to needs, and product variety that offers interesting choices (Chen & Teng, 2013; Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009). In addition to a professional website contributing to a reputable store image, several other studies have shown that web atmosphere (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009; Wu, Cheng, & Yen, 2012; Yun & Good, 2007), ease of navigation (Verhagen & Van Dolen, 2009) and search capabilities (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2004) constituted the key components of a store image.

The findings further suggested that online retailers were assertive when it comes to dealing with potential challenges that may surfaced after purchase. Assertiveness has not emerged as an intangible or psychological factor in the store image literature. Previous studies were designed to examine store attributes rather than behavioural characteristics and this could be a possible reason why studies have not reported retailers' assertiveness with respect to product returns and delivery failures. Product return and delivery constructs were rarely studied in store image literature. Product return was mentioned only by Van der Heijden and Verhagen (2002, 2004) while the delivery attribute has been captured under two different aspects, logistics settlement (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2002, 2004) and service quality of the e-tailer (Yun & Good, 2007). Choice, speed and reliability of delivery (Van der Heijden & Verhagen, 2002, 2004) as well as delivery tracking capability (Yun & Good, 2007) were found to be significant factors affecting consumers' perception of the store's image.

The literature relating to store image has paid little attention to the legitimacy of the online retailer, as research on online store image is largely adopted from studies on physical stores. Legitimacy of the physical store is not a critical concern as compared to the Internet retailing context where sellers can remain anonymous. Yun and Good (2007) indicated that the ease of contacting sellers is one item of measuring the store's service level that may affect its image. This study, too, found that when sellers provide multiple points of contact for buyers to reach them, it enhanced their image of being a legitimate merchant.

6.5 Expanding the Set of Strategic Information Actions

Online retailers employed four categories of actions in relation to information disclosure on their websites: reveal, dramatise, disclose selectively and conceal. These actions are compared and contrasted with a similar conceptualization on strategic disclosure of information in the B2C e-commerce context discussed by Granados and colleagues (Granados & Gupta, 2013; Granados et al., 2010) (see Table 25). While three of their strategic options - disclose, distort and conceal, are similar to the findings in this study, not all are exactly alike. Disclose is a transparent option described as "all information elements are revealed by making them available and accessible" (Granados et al., 2010, p. 211), whereas this study found that no information category (not even product feature or total price) seems to be completely transparent. Even for highly informative categories (such as privacy policy), not all retailers have informed how they kept data confidential and secured. Rather, this study suggested 'reveal' as an action in which extensive elaboration is a tactic where a large quantity of information is disclosed, but did not imply everything is made known. The action to 'disclose selectively' is similar to the 'distort' option in Granados et al. (2010)'s proposition, except this study did not find any intention to mislead with inaccurate information, and hence 'disclose selectively' is deemed an appropriate label. As for the 'bias' option, this study did not find any evidence to support the case where information may be biased towards competitors.

A finding from this study that did not appear in Granados et al. (2010)'s theorization is that online retailers dramatise information presented on their website. The dramatisation of information was also evident in persuasion research within the context of consumer marketing. Dramatisation as an effect to improve vividness in information was theorised as being capable of enhancing the persuasion strength of a message (McGuire, 2000). Empirical evidence shows that increases in vividness on websites led to consumers having greater positive attitudes towards the websites and were more enduring over time (Coyle & Thorson, 2001). From the findings of this study, the action to dramatise information is exercised through three ways: visual amplification, language exaggeration and figurative reinterpretation. While visual amplification relies on imagery appeals, the latter two is language-dependent. The medium through which dramatisation occurred is consistent with the symbol sets depicted in the media synchronicity theory, which stated that information can be conveyed in multiple ways, such as visual, images, videos and written words (Dennis et al., 2008).

As a retail website is inherently a marketing communication platform for the store, the use of vivid information that is emotionally interesting, concrete and image provoking is preferred

(Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Likewise, the findings in this study showed that vividness in the form of exaggeration, figurative language and imagery were used to dramatise the information presented on retailers' website. Figurative language, in particular, has proven its efficacy as an effective persuasion tool more than plain literal language. The use of figurative language in advertising literature was shown to elicit favourable attitudes from consumers towards a product, regardless of product categories or consumption contexts (C.-T. Chang & Yen, 2013; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2009). Dramatizing information relied on the use of superlatives and exaggerations and consumers were receptive of such use of language in advertisements (Kronrod & Danziger, 2013).

Applying the four strategic actions on web information categories resulted in various degrees of information transparency across a spectrum. Drawing from Lamming, Caldwell and Philips' (2006) conceptualization on information exchange between business partners, four transparency states (clear, translucent, dazzle and opaque) were adapted. The reveal action produces clarity, although it does not imply full transparency. The selective disclosure action leads to translucency and the conceal action give rise to opacity. While the dramatise action results in a 'dazzle' state, it is of a different nature from that conceptualized by Lamming et al. (2006), who defined it as an accidental or deliberate act of presenting too much data such that the recipient is unable to handle it effectively. The dramatise action in this case is intentional and does not seek to overload the reader with information but to attract attention through creative use of language.

Table 25: Comparison of constructs between this study and Granados and Gupta's

Study by Granados and Gupta (2013, p. 639)		**This study**	
Information option	**Description**	**Information option / tactic**	**Description**
Disclose	Full revelation, information is available and easy to interpret	Reveal	Information is available in a large amount but not everything may be disclosed
Distort	Information is out-dated, incomplete, inaccurate, or obfuscated	Disclose selectively	Information disclosed is incomplete or obfuscated
Bias	Preferential display of information to the detriment of competitors		
Conceal	Full opacity, information is not available	Conceal	Information is totally left out and unavailable on the website
		Dramatise	Information is displayed in an exaggerated fashion, leveraging either on language or imagery appeals

6.6 Presenting the Web Façade of Retail Stores: Impressionist versus Minimalist

The finding which indicated online stores leveraged their websites to manage public impressions is supported by Winter et al.'s (2003) suggestion that web presence is among the key organisation resources used to manage impressions. Not only do websites served as electronic storefronts (Winter et al., 2003), they represented an overall first impression of the business' web presence. This thesis goes beyond the store window concept to a retail web façade, where a store attempted to project its images through the façade. The web façade of the online stores comprised of either a single store image or a combination of four images – reputation, legitimacy, trustworthiness and assertiveness. Depending on the extent of images portrayed, the web façade may take the form of a minimalist or an impressionist. The minimalist store attempted to project only one to two store images, while the impressionist sought to foster three or all four images. The simple, basic, and modest minimalist is contrasted with the developed, elaborate and stylish impressionist. The minimalist subscribed to the idea that less is more, and advocated focusing on what is truly important while eliminating the frills. The concept of being minimalist also connoted simplicity, unclutteredness, as well as a clean layout that reduced the use of text and/or graphics to a minimum (see Appendix 16.1 for an example of a minimalist store home page). On the contrary, the impressionist style is cluttered, vibrant, eye-catching, and is designed for maximum impact (see Appendix 16.2 for an example of an impressionist store homepage). The impressionist storefront is often portrayed as highly professional, while behind the scenes, the store could be operated by either a sole proprietor or a small team of people scrambling to manage the day-to-day activities of the entire store (Tumbas, Berente, Seidel, & vom Brocke, 2015).

In the context of a small business adoption of website as a marketing tool, the finding that online stores' web presence could be presented as different web façades provided an extended perspective to the notion of website optimisation. Simmons, Armstrong, and Durkin (2011, p. 538) argued for website optimisation as an approach to "*make the most of* website adoption" for marketing communications, emphasising the site content and tools for online promotion and the enhancement of brand image. The optimisation perspective focuses on the effective use of website marketing tools towards business growth, thereby addressing an area that has been overlooked by studies on small business' adoption of the Internet (Simmons, 2008).

The concept of the impressionist store, as developed in this study, parallels with the optimising perspective advanced by Simmons et al. (2011) as the stores strived to maximise a positive image from utilizing as many of the impression management tactics as possible to project multiple store images. On the other hand, the minimalist store's approach to website marketing communications is satisficing, which is a decision-making strategy that aims to reach a satisfactory outcome rather than the best result (Simon, 1959, 1972). Small businesses were in fact found to adopt a less complicated decision-making process on marketing issues than theorised in studies of strategic management (Jocumsen, 2004). Achieving a good-enough outcome therefore could be warranted for the small business considering the constraints they faced in terms of limited resources (see Table 26).

Table 26: Two types of web facade on retail websites

Web Façade	**Approach**	**Extent of Store Images Presented**
Minimalist	Satisficing	1 to 2
Impressionist	Optimising	3 to 4

6.7 Steering IM Effort through Entrepreneurial Motivation

While entrepreneurial motivation is not an explicit component of the dramaturgical model, it may steer the impression management effort of online sellers. The accounts of online retailers regarding their motivation to start, sustain and grow their e-business served as the primary cues that reflected the extent of their impression management efforts. Highly motivated entrepreneurs were characterised by traits such as devoting more time to run their business, leveraging e-commerce to improve the overall profit margin, and possessing an ambitious drive to expand into new markets or business models. Conversely, less motivated retailers run their online stores as sidelines, which revolved around their primary role in life, such as mothers to young children. A few of them appeared to be less enthusiastic towards pursuing profits and expressed uncertainty over the future of their businesses. Since managing public impressions of the online store played a role towards business outcomes, retailers' motivation could possibly be linked to the effort invested in impression management.

Success in business ventures begins with an individual's motivation to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities and willingness to undertake the venturing process (Shane, Locke, & Collins, 2012). The aspirations of online retailers were found to be heterogeneous in this study as demonstrated by their different levels of motivation in starting the business, sustaining the current business and driving future growth. The varied aspirations towards engaging in entrepreneurship is supported by literature on nascent (Cassar, 2007) and ambitious entrepreneurs (Hermans et al., 2015). Two distinct groups of participants identified within the study delineated the different views of retailers regarding current and future directions, which were linked to their motivation level. The first group of highly motivated storeowners are the most ambitious as they wanted the e-business to succeed. The behaviour of these entrepreneurs is what Simon (1959), an influential American economist, coined as 'maximising' and in the entrepreneurial context 'profit maximising' (Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001). Business owners who prefer to pursue growth generally value financial success (Cassar, 2007). The second group of moderately motivated retailers treated the online business as secondary, relative to their core business (wholesale or retail business) or to their primary roles in life (mother or counsellor). They appeared to be less motivated by profiteering as the e-business is merely a sideline. Profit satisficing (Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001) is the key characteristics of this group. Likewise, this view is similar to the subsistence entrepreneurial perspective that operating a business is merely a means to an end, where the purpose is to keep oneself employed (Spence & Rutherfoord, 2001). In addition, their primary self-identity might be disassociated from entrepreneurship. This view is consistent with Spence and Rutherfoord's (2001) depiction of entrepreneurs whose social identity reflects their choice of lifestyle, thereby influencing their entrepreneurial orientation towards success.

IM literature theorises that impression motivation is higher for the person who places a high value on his desired goals (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). The findings suggested that motivation might have an indirect implication on retailers' impression management effort. The case for this is best explained by the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) and the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1985; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The attitude-intention-behaviour concept (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) explained the variance in current behaviour and future intention of online retailers towards business sustainability and expansion given their level of motivation in achieving e-business success. The highly motivated retailer turned out to be the most ambitious entrepreneur who willingly invests substantial effort in marketing and managing public impressions to pursue his business. The growth behaviour of an ambitious entrepreneur, one who seeks to maximise the creation of value in terms of profit and business growth, is determined by his intention towards firm growth, and is, in turn an outcome of the entrepreneur's attitude (Hermans et al., 2015). The linkage of attitude to intention and behaviour has long been documented in entrepreneurship studies and receives empirical support in recent studies as well, such as those conducted by Kautonen, Gelderen, and Fink (2015); Linan and Chen (2009); Van Gelderen et al. (2008). The link of impression management to achievement motivation has also emerged in the findings of a recent study by Elliot et al. (2016), where increased instances of impression management were associated with high achievement motivation. High-achievement motivated individuals exercise self-regulation for purposes of impression management to reach the twin outcomes of performing better and to avoid doing worse than previous performances.

6.8 Advancing a Dramaturgical Perspective of IM by Online Retailers

Marketing scholars, such as Fisk and Grove (1996) suggested impression management as a distinctive way of characterizing marketing and the use of the drama metaphor (Moisio & Arnould, 2005) as a marketing language (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008). This study indicated that impression management is pervasive throughout retail websites, and especially on the homepage representing the virtual storefronts. The finding is congruent with Fisk and Grove's (1996, p. 8) assertion that "impression management is woven intimately into the fabric of the marketing enterprise".

Drawing on Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory as the theoretical underpinning to investigate impression management behaviour of online retailers, this study built on authoritative work advanced by academics in the IS, marketing and sociology disciplines. Goffman's influential model of human interaction has shown how individuals use expressions to impress others. Subsequent works that expanded on Goffman's idea had shed light on how the model could be applied to organisation contexts. For example, Da Cunha's (2013) model of production of performance data shows how managers in organisation use information to impress their leaders. The model of building and projecting store images presented in this study shows how online retailers use information to impress consumers. Similar to Da Cunha (2013), this research adapted, rather than adopts Goffman's model to explicate different ways information can be strategically manipulated. Da Cunha shows that exaggeration of information is used to foster good impressions while this study suggested selectively disclosing information, besides dramatizing, serves the same function. Da Cunha further suggested information-hiding to preserving one's image while this study demonstrated information-giving is useful as a protective strategy against potential image threats.

The dramaturgical model that is empirically developed from this study encapsulated the essence of managing impressions on retail websites with a focus on information manipulation. Advancing a dramaturgical perspective can play an important role towards the understanding of contemporary marketing practice and in explaining practice to bridge the theory-practice gap (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008). Irrelevance of research to practice is one of the main factors that perpetuates the divide between academics and practitioners (Baines, Brennan, Gill, & Mortimore, 2009; Baker, 2001). The empirically developed model aimed to assist in elevating the appreciation of the backroom dynamics occurring at the supply end, with the purpose of influencing consumer demand (Fisk & Grove, 1996). This study took an information-focused approach to model the process between the key components that delivered the façade of online stores. As the model specified the details of how functional information could be transformed and dramatised to serve the needs of marketing communication, it exposed the intricacies of information manipulation made possible by varying transparency levels. Grounded on a dramaturgy theory, the model contributed toward addressing critics who lament that marketing studies drew on inappropriate theories "that never really explained practice in the first place" (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008, p. 494). Table 27 shows the major findings gleaned from this study and the existing studies related to these findings.

Table 27: Major findings emerged in this study

Concepts	Key Findings	Related studies
Dramaturgical terms of reference	The interaction in a virtual shopping environment is redefined as the encounter between the retail website (performer) and web visitor (audience).	Goffman (1959)
Facets of the dramaturgical model	Two facets of the dramaturgical model are persuasive and protective. The persuasive facet is prevalent throughout the pre-purchase phase of the shopping process while the protective facet is targeted at averting challenges during the post-purchase phase.	Da Cunha (2013)
Store images	Three store images (reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness) support the persuasive facet while the assertive image supports the protective facet of the model.	Schlosser et al. (2006) Smith et al. (2011) Y.-S. Chang and Fang (2013) K. J. Stewart (2003)
Impression management tactics	Impression management tactics supporting the persuasive facet play the role of idealizing the dispositional characteristics of the store. Impression management tactics that augment the protective facet are anticipatory in nature and serve to avert potentially challenging situations by either maximising negative outcomes or minimising positive consequences.	Tyler et al. (2012) Elsbach et al. (1998) Mohamed et al. (1999) Cialdini (1989)
Information tactics in presenting idealized information	Information tactics are the result of producing either a large amount, some information or none at all.	Sandberg and Holmlund (2015)
Strategic transparency actions in regulating flow of information	Four actions (reveal, selectively disclose, dramatise and conceal) can be applied to website information categories.	Granados et al. (2010) Lamming et al. (2006)
Web façade	The web façade represents the firm's communication of a retail store façade as either a minimalist or impressionist.	Simmons et al. (2011)
Entrepreneurial motivation	Retailers' motivation, in terms of the importance they placed on the e-business and their future plans for the stores, may influence their impression management behaviour.	Elliot et al. (2016) Hermans et al. (2015)

6.9 Summary

The thesis examined how online retail stores manage impressions on their websites within a marketing context. Using a dramaturgical perspective, the study uncovered the presentation of two types of web façade that is dependent on the portrayal of store images. A minimalist façade represented an outcome from adopting a satisficing approach towards fostering online impressions while an impressionist façade resulted from an optimising approach to project as many store images as possible. The study also identified three store images portrayed during the pre-purchase phase as reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness, which represented the persuasive facet of the dramaturgical model. A second protective facet served to project an assertive image to avert buyers' challenges during the post-purchase phase. Behind the storefront images, impression management tactics at the backstage enabled the creation of these store images. The impression management tactics in turn are built on the application of strategic transparency actions (reveal, selectively disclose, dramatise, conceal) on website information elements to derive six information tactics used for creating impression tactics. Taken together, the components of the dramaturgical model integrate to illustrate how information is manipulated at the backstage before it is finally presented at the virtual storefront.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

7.1 Chapter Introduction

Although managing consumers' perception is widely considered an important aspect of e-commerce, limited research attention has been given to how retail stores manipulate information to manage consumers' perception of their store image. The objective of this study was to investigate the ways under-resourced online retailers attempt to influence consumer perceptions through an approach that entails controlling and presenting packaged information on their websites. The main research question that guided the inquiry was:

> *How do under-resourced online retailers shape store images through impression management on retail websites?*

In answering the research question, the research uncovered that attempts by retailers to influence consumers' perception was undertaken in three steps. First, the manipulation of information by applying strategic actions on information elements is a preparatory step. Second, impression management tactics shaped the construction of the retailer's intended store images. The third step involved projecting images relevant to the phase of consumer's shopping process. Integrating the above components into a dramaturgical model, the thesis presented a perspective theoretically grounded on the drama metaphor.

The remainder of this chapter summarises the major outcomes of the study, and considers the implications for theory and particularly for practice. This chapter also indicates the limitations of the study and recommends directions for future research.

7.2 Implications for Theory

This thesis made an original contribution to theory in terms of a dramaturgical model of impression management by online retail stores as outlined in Chapter 6. The model substantiated the argument that an online store image could be fostered through impression management on retail websites. The model was developed from empirical evidence drawn from examining website marketing practices of online retailers through multiple case studies of online retail stores in Singapore. This research explicated how online retailers strategically manipulate and package information to address two seemingly conflicting goals – first, to persuade consumers by presenting idealised images of the store; and second, to protect the stores' interest through attempts to avert potential demands from buyers by projecting an assertive image. The persuasive facet of the model was supported by store images of reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness while the protective facet is sustained by an assertive image. Four store images were created out of the combination of nine impression management tactics, which were in turn derived from six information tactics. Information tactics were produced from the application of four strategic transparency actions on web information categories. Besides illustrating the dramaturgical process of creating online store images, the research also uncovered a host of impression management tactics, information tactics and strategic transparency actions as the underlying basis for the construction of store images (see Table 28).

Table 28: Building blocks for the construction of store images

Impression management tactics	**Information tactics**	**Strategic transparency actions**
• Emphasise/ De-emphasise quality • Emulate large retailers • Strategically disclose seller identity • Draw attention to online social relationships • Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment • Appeal to institutional trust • Proclaim commitment to privacy promises • Transfer agency prior to failed delivery • Appear bureaucratic towards product returns	• Extensive elaboration • Visual amplification • Language exaggeration • Figurative reinterpretation • Selective disclosure • Complete omission	• Reveal • Conceal • Selectively disclose • Dramatise

The dramaturgical model of impression management in an e-commerce context shows that similar goals can be achieved by applying different treatments to information when compared to Da Cunha's (2013) model. Both the persuasive facet of this model and the exploitative specification in Da Cunha's model serve to impress the target audience but, in different ways. Information in this model is either dramatised or selectively disclosed to create favourable impressions while Da Cunha's model suggests the exaggeration of information beyond the truth (such as the deliberate inflation of numerical data). Both the protection aspects of the two models aimed to avoid threats to the actor's image but again in different ways. The model derived in the thesis did so by revealing information (about the store's delivery and return policies) while Da Cunha's model supported data hiding (that is non-compliant with work procedures). Therefore, this research contributed to dramaturgy theory and its application to the B2C e-commerce context by demonstrating alternative ways in which information could be produced or reduced towards managing impressions.

Another contribution from this research was to establish the conceptual connection between three disjointed bodies of literature on impression management, B2C e-commerce and retail store image. The dramaturgical process of the model linked the utilisation of information tactics and impression management tactics with the projection of online store images. Additionally, the model also complemented and extended extant work on each of the three fields of study as described below.

Implications for organisation impression management literature

A recent review of organisational impression management behaviour suggested an outcome-oriented typology based on maximising or minimising good or bad perceptions (Bolino et al., 2008). An alternative categorisation by Elsbach (2003) took into consideration the nature and timing of consequences to derive proactive, remedial and anticipatory tactics. The nine IM tactics produced by this study supports both categorisations. The first six tactics are proactive and aims to maximise good impressions. The tactic to transfer agency is a type of anticipatory excuse that aim to minimise bad perceptions while the tactic of appearing bureaucratic is an anticipatory obfuscation that maximises the perception of negative consequences. Table 29 shows the alignment of the nine impression management tactics with the above two typologies.

Table 29: Alignment of 9 IM tactics with existing typologies

Outcome	Nature / timing of consequences	IM tactics in this study
Maximise good	Proactive	• Emphasise/ de-emphasise quality • Emulate large retailers • Strategically disclose seller identity • Draw attention to online social relationships • Proclaim commitment to order fulfilment • Appeal to institutional trust • Proclaim commitment to privacy promises
Minimise bad	Remedial	• Transfer agency prior to failed delivery
Maximise bad	Anticipatory	• Appear bureaucratic towards product returns

Implications for retail store image literature

The online store image literature has adopted the conventional positivist approach of traditional retail store image studies. Departing from positivist marketing conceptions due to its inadequacies (Fillis & Rentschler, 2008), this thesis presented a constructivist view of small firms' impression management effort through marketing communications on retail websites. Instead of surveying consumers, the study examined retailers' practices to infer the store images projected on their websites. Consumer perceptions of online store image have focused primarily on the functional aspects of websites (such as usability), while neglecting its psychological characteristics. This study shed light on the socio-psychological characteristics construed by online retailers, by validating the importance of reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness as institutional factors of store image. Trustworthiness has surfaced as a key component of online store image (E.-C. Chang & Tseng, 2013) while reputation and legitimacy were important considerations to e-tailers in the consumer marketing literature. More significantly, this study identified assertiveness as a new dimension of online store image. An image of retailer assertiveness has yet to surface in store image literature although plenty evidence exist to demonstrate retailers' protectionist practices against product returns by consumers.

Implications to B2C e-commerce literature

This study has implications to the B2C e-commerce research as well. The results of the study extended and complemented the set of strategic transparency actions in the research framework for B2C transparency strategy (Granados et al., 2010) by introducing the dramatise action and validating the three other actions – reveal, conceal and selectively disclose. The dramatise action works to transform information from simplicity to creativity. Product description, when dramatised, appeared more compelling and appealing than its original representation. These four strategic actions provided sellers the flexibility to shape information tactics towards influencing consumers' purchase decisions.

Possible implications for symbolic action research in IS

Finally, this study may have possible implications to symbolic action research as it provided initial empirical evidence to support the theorizing of a symbolic action view of information system. IS research on symbolic action is based on the notion that information is a symbol that mediates organisation actions and communications. The concept of symbolic action constitutes the integration of symbols, technologies mediating these symbols and social practices. With this in mind, the research may be considered befitting a symbolic action study, as the marketing communications of online retailers (a type of social practice) within an e-commerce system (a type of IS) is mediated by information presented in varying degrees of transparency (i.e. symbols). In addressing the issue to explore how retailers portray intended store images on retail websites, this research focused on how online retailers interpret what should be communicated on their retail websites through strategic manipulation of symbol sets (including text, images and videos), and this interpretation defined the characteristics of the online retail image. Therefore this research suggested that web technologies provide the leverage on which online retailers, as users of IS, are enabled to manage impressions through the mediation of symbols (i.e. information). In doing so, this thesis pointed to a facet of symbolic action nested in the context of IS e-commerce.

The contributions of this thesis are summarised in Table 30.

Table 30: Contributions of this study and extensions of current works

Field	Key findings of current studies	Contributions of this study
Dramaturgy	Da Cunha (2013) suggested the production of work performance data can be illustrated through a dramaturgical model. The exploitative specification enabled the presentation of idealized performance by exaggerating information while the protective specification downplayed performance data that may threaten a good image through information-hiding strategies.	This study proposed a dramaturgical model of impression management by online retail stores. The model consists of two facets – (i) a persuasive facet that attracts consumers to buy by dramatizing or selectively disclosing information, and (ii) a protective facet that shields retailers from potential post-purchase demands from buyers through information-giving tactics. This study derived 6 information tactics relevant to online stores.
Retail store image	Chang & Tseng (2013) suggested trustworthiness is a component of e-store image. Other studies suggested reputation (Wang, Wing, Yang & Lai, 2014) and legitimacy (Chen, Gillenson & Sherrell, 2002) support store image as well.	This study introduces assertiveness as an online store image, and validates trustworthiness, reputation and legitimacy as images directly and indirectly projected by online stores.
Organisation impression management (OIM)	Bolino et al. (2008) suggested classifying tactics along maximising or minimising good or bad. Elsbach (2003) suggested that OIM can be anticipatory in nature.	This study produced a total of 9 OIM tactics which can be used in the online context of website marketing by retail stores. In relation to Bolino et al. (2008)'s review, this study identified 6 tactics that can be classified as maximising good, 1 as maximising bad and 1 as minimising bad. In relation to Elsbach (2003)'s review, this study also identified an anticipatory excuse tactic, an anticipatory obfuscation tactic and 6 other proactive OIM tactics.

Field	Key findings of current studies	Contributions of this study
B2C e-commerce	Granados et al. (2010) proposed four possible actions to reveal information strategically – disclose, distort, bias and conceal for B2C e-commerce sellers	This study validated three strategic transparency actions – disclose, conceal and distort (similar to ‘selectively disclose’ in this study) and introduced a new action – dramatise.

7.3 Implications for Practice

The study has practical implications for the professional practice of small business owners as well as marketers; specifically, though the findings of this study are most significant for small e-business owners. The impression management tactics suggested in the study provide a leverage point that can be used to inform the planning and subsequent implementation of website marketing despite their limited resources. The study suggested nine impression management tactics and four store images, from which e-business owners could select as a focal image. For example, e-business owners could enhance their image of trustworthiness using the impression management tactics suggested in this research as trustworthiness was highlighted in the literature as a critical factor for influencing consumers' perception of an online store. Alternatively, they could strengthen those images which the store is lacking to improve the overall store image. Still, businesses with growth intentions could enhance all four types of store images to become increasingly effective at managing public's perceptions. Store images representing institutional characteristics such as reputation, legitimacy and trustworthiness could be further developed as part of the firm's 'soft' assets.

Additionally, this study proposed an information disclosure matrix (see Table 31 for an example) adapted from Granados and Gupta (2013), which provides a guide for small business owners to plan and design their web information disclosure strategy by selecting the combination of strategic actions and information elements that best suits the firm. In outlining the information disclosure strategy for the firm, due consideration need to be given to align it to the firm's overall business strategy as well as marketing goals.

Table 31: An example of the information disclosure matrix in an online retail environment

Information Category	**Strategic Action**			
	Reveal	**Selectively Disclose**	**Dramatise**	**Conceal**
Product features	No	Yes	Yes	No
Delivery process	Yes	Yes	No	No
Tracking process	No	Yes	No	No
Store policy (e.g. returns & refunds)	Yes	Yes	No	No
Privacy policy	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Information about seller	No	Yes	No	Yes

'Yes' indicates suitability of the action to be applied on an information element, whereas 'No' indicates otherwise.

For marketers, the study suggested website marketing remains to be a core strategy of an integrated marketing communications plan for small firms. Development for marketing communications should be considered within the broader strategy of the firm. Marketers could leverage on the various modes of communication on websites as the basis for enhancing interaction and developing long-term relationship with customers. For example, online chat enhances interaction with customers while embedded newsfeeds from social media networks, blogs, newsletter or mailing list, enables the firm to stay connected with loyal customers.

7.4 Limitations

Like any other research, this study is not free from limitations. The qualitative nature of this empirical inquiry placed a limitation on the generalizability of the findings. This study used an interpretive methodology to develop an in-depth understanding of retailers' online impression management behaviour. With a small sample size, purposive sampling of participants from a population confined to a geographical location (Singapore) and the selection of cases based on online shops selling consumer products, the study therefore did not produce generalizable explanations that represent the wider online retailing community. While the methodology used was appropriate for the purpose of the study, the sample size was too small to draw generalised conclusions regarding the phenomenon of impression management on retail websites as a whole, and hence provides opportunities for further research based on the findings of this study.

While this study corroborated evidence from two sources of empirical data - interviews and web content, and was supported by existing literature, the analysis was still subjected to the researcher's assumptions, beliefs and bias. The inherent subjectivity of the interpretive paradigm implied that it is not possible to eliminate the researcher's bias completely, nor set them aside totally (Corbin & Strauss, 2008b). The research outcomes are a result of the researcher's interpretations of the stories narrated by the participants. While the researcher is careful about not imposing her experience as an online shopper upon the data, Corbin and Strauss (2008b) suggest that drawing upon personal experiences stimulates thinking about the different possibilities of interpreting meanings. As such, other researchers who attempt to replicate this study may produce different findings due to the difference in individual experiences.

Participants, as well as researchers, bring bias to their accounts as they relate their experiences. Described as the social desirable response syndrome, participants may be tempted to give calculated responses to create favourable impressions of the store, of the products or of themselves. In short, participants may be motivated to manage the researcher's impressions of them due to the "human tendency to present oneself in the best possible light" (Fisher, 1993, p. 303). The researcher observed this syndrome on a few occasions during the interviews (see the section on 'Afterword'). The pervasiveness of social desirability bias has been a challenge to scholars as it may potentially distort theoretical conclusions. Impression management, being one of the factors leading to the bias was identified as "the culprit in confounding research data" (King & Bruner, 2000, p. 83). To reduce potential bias, this study used the indirect questioning technique, which has shown to mitigate the effects of social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). Instead of asking participants directly about their actions on impressing others on their websites, they were probed on topics related to how they promote their online store and products, how they handle customer orders, and their communication with customers in general.

7.5 Recommendations for Future Research

Acknowledging the limitations surrounding the study, this section outlines several opportunities for future research to extend the study into fruitful lines of inquiry. Findings drawn from the dramaturgical model can be refined into hypotheses to test the relationships between the constructs identified in the findings. For example, hypotheses may be formulated to test the relationships between (i) online store image and web façade, (ii) strategic transparency actions and online impressions, (iii) impression management tactics and online store image, and (iv) entrepreneurial motivation and online impression management behaviour, can be examined more thoroughly. Large-scale quantitative surveys with big sample sizes may be conducted to operationalise the testing, and to which the survey results could then be generalised.

As the study adopts a supply perspective and a retailer-focus approach, surveying consumers is not the primary objective of this study, although a small sample of consumers were surveyed for their opinions on the impression management tactics used by retailers. Nonetheless, a survey using a larger sample size is an important next step. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of the impression management tactics on projecting the desired store images on consumers, that is, whether the intended image (that is, what the firm wants others to think of it) (Brown et al., 2006) matches the actual perception of consumers. Such a line of inquiry could attempt to reconcile the differing viewpoints between the supply (retailer) and demand (consumer) sides. The implication to retailers is an improved understanding on how decisions made with respect to information on retail websites affect the way consumers responds.

One potential extension to the online store image literature is to test the effect of online store image on purchase intention as a multi-dimensional construct comprising of corporate images of reputation, legitimacy, trustworthiness and assertiveness. The projection of corporate images provides an interesting approach to compare and contrast with consumers' perceptions of the store. Consumer perspectives have long dominated existing literature on store image and as a result our knowledge of key determinants are narrowly limited to utilitarian (such as usability) and hedonic (such as enjoyment) factors, with the exception of trustworthiness. Future research could assess the degree of influence of other components of online store image - reputation, legitimacy, and trustworthiness, on online purchase intentions.

In defining the scope of the thesis to focus on the symbolic actions of online retailers, the researcher excluded the exploration of substantive actions that may have been undertaken by retail stores. Substantive and symbolic actions are cues that organisations used to manipulate to signal corporate reputation (Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2009). As substantive actions may involve utilization of more resources, under-resourced retailers may find it challenging to implement such actions. Future research may explore retailers' actions holistically, in terms of both substantive and symbolic actions. Bigger size retailers are deemed as more appropriate cases for such studies and are expected to yield more fruitful results.

An additional avenue to replicate this study would be exploring impression management in the m-commerce context. The pervasive use of mobile devices (such as smart phones) in many developed nations and the recent surge in research interest on m-commerce would provide considerable impetus to the further development of online impression management. Previous studies have shown that impression management through the use of design aesthetics on mobile websites significantly affected users' perceived usefulness and ease of use, and which in turn influenced loyalty and trust (for example, Li & Yeh, 2010; Cyr, Head & Ivanov, 2006). Building on this vein of research, future studies could investigate whether IM tactics work similarly or differently on web and mobile sites, and the extent to which IM on these media differ. Having such an understanding would facilitate the integration of retailers' cross-channel marketing efforts.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

The thesis presents two conclusions in relation to the research topic. First, web presence affords small firms the opportunity to influence perceptions of the public in a cost-effective way, through the manipulation of symbols, particularly language and images, which do not require heavy investment in sophisticated information systems, hence enabling the under-resourced firm to maintain their focus on the bottom-line.

Second, web-based impression management affords small e-businesses to appear as best as they can be, or even better than what they are. They do so by maximising the utilization of impression management tactics to achieve an impressionist façade. For these e-businesses, the world is indeed a stage, a stage situated on the Internet where the performance reaches out to target audience from all over the world.

Afterword

The thesis ends with an interesting observation that resonates pertinently with Goffman's depiction of the presentation of self in everyday life. During the interview process, online retailers were noticeably actively managing the researcher's impression of them. Goffman describes how instances of impression management can be best observed as the actor moved from the front stage to the backstage and vice versa. In the case of the interviews with retailer participants, interruptions that occur provide salient opportunities to witness their behavioural differences before the audio recording was switched off (i.e. front stage), after it was switched off (i.e. backstage) and upon resumption of the interview, switched on again (i.e. front stage). In one example, the interview was interrupted by a phone call made to the interviewee. She politely excused herself before picking up the call while the researcher paused the audio recording. As she remained seated in front of the researcher, her conversation with the other party was clearly audible. She switched from well-spoken English to the colloquial Singlish[11] upon answering the call. Once the call ended, her attention was turned to the researcher again and this is when the transition from the conversational-style Singlish back to standard English was obvious. Although the interview was conducted in an informal manner and in a relaxed environment of a café, the interviewee might feel compelled to speak in her best possible voice due to the recording of the conversation.

The second example of impression management took place during an interview with a participant who leverages the opportunity to promote her range of organic products to the researcher. She might have reckoned that every new contact presents a valuable chance to share her knowledge about the wonderful products she deeply believed in. Delivering a perfect sales pitch, she described the ingredients in detail, and while doing so, emphasised the product benefits at length. The researcher also witnessed a few other examples of indirect selling by the interviewees to the researcher during the course of the interview.

The above two examples of self-presentation and product promotion serve to remind us that impression management is indeed pervasive in everyday life, including during the field interviews of a research project that analyses the said phenomenon.

[11] Singlish is the spoken Singaporean English, a language of the street, and is a blend of several other local languages such as Malay, Mandarin and Chinese dialects including Hokkien, and Cantonese.

My motivation. Some five years ago, my curiosity on retail websites grew together with my appetite for online shopping. Then came the opportunity for this research study, which I used to unveil the mystery behind the facades of online storefronts. My professional experience in project management may appear less relevant at first but it has proven to be applicable in managing the entire study journey."

Appendix 1: Approval by Ethics Committee

UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA
AUSTRALIA'S CAPITAL UNIVERSITY

4 August 2014

APPROVED - Project number 14-165

Ms Sin Mei Cheah
Faculty of Business, Government & Law
University of Canberra
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Sin Mei,

The Human Research Ethics Committee has considered your application to conduct research with human subjects for the project titled **Morality and Consumer Marketing Practices of Small Businesses in B2C e-Marketplaces**.

Approval is granted until 31 December 2015.

The following general conditions apply to your approval.

These requirements are determined by University policy and the ***National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*** (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007).

Monitoring:	You must, in conjunction with your supervisor, assist the Committee to monitor the conduct of approved research by completing and promptly returning project review forms, which will be sent to you at the end of your project and, in the case of extended research, at least annually during the approval period.
Discontinuation of research:	You must, in conjunction with your supervisor, inform the Committee, giving reasons, if the research is not conducted or is discontinued before the expected date of completion.
Extension of approval:	If your project will not be complete by the expiry date stated above, you must apply in writing for extension of approval. Application should be made before current approval expires; should specify a new completion date; should include reasons for your request.
Retention and storage of data:	University policy states that all research data must be stored securely, on University premises, for a minimum of five years. You must ensure that all records are transferred to the University when the project is complete.
Contact details and notification of changes:	All email contact should use the UC email address. You should advise the Committee of any change of address during or soon after the approval period including, if appropriate, email address(es).

Yours sincerely
Human Research Ethics Committee

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Appendix 2: List of OIM Tactics and their Definitions

OIM Tactics	Definition	Source(s)
Accounts	"Explanations of a predicament-creating event which seek to minimize the apparent severity of the predicament"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)
Apologies	"Admissions of blameworthiness for a negative event which includes expressions of remorse and requests for a pardon"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115) Gardner and Martinko (1988)
Assertive	Acquisitively used as opportunities to enhance one's image	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 111) citing Tedeschi and Norman (1985)
Defensive	Reactively used in response to predicaments such as to minimise or repair damaged images	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 111) citing Tedeschi and Norman (1985)
Demonstrative	Provision of specific facts and detailed explanations about a firm's operations and actions	Bansal and Kistruck (2006, p. 165)
Direct	"Techniques for presenting information about one's own traits, abilities, and accomplishments"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 111) citing Cialdini et al. (1976, p. 45)
Disclaimers	"Explanations given prior to a potentially embarrassing action in order to ward off any negative repercussions for the actor's image"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115) Tedeschi and Norman (1985) Schlenker (1980)
Enhancements	Behaviours "employed to magnify an organisation's positive actions or accomplishments"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 117)
Entitlements	Behaviours "used to claim responsibility for positive outcomes and consequences"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 117)
Excuses	"Explanations in which one admits that the disruptive act is bad, wrong or inappropriate but disassociates himself (or herself) from it"	Tedeschi and Riess (1981, p. 281) Mohamed et al. (1999)
Exemplification	"Behaviours that are used by the organisation to project images of integrity, social responsibility, and moral worthiness"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)

OIM Tactics	Definition	Source(s)
Illustrative	Provision of broad, generalised comments and pictorial images of a firm	Bansal and Kistruck (2006, p. 165)
Indirect	"Techniques undertaken to enhance or protect one's image by managing information about the people and things with which one is simply associated"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 111) citing Cialdini et al. (1976, p. 46)
Ingratiation	A form of assertive IM that is "a class of strategic behaviours illicitly designed to influence a particular other person concerning the attractiveness of one's personal qualities"	Bolino et al. (2008) Jones (1964, p. 11) Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)
Intimidation	A form of assertive IM that "present the organisation as a powerful and dangerous entity which is able and willing to inflict harm on those that frustrate its efforts and objectives"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)
Justifications	Behaviour of an actor who "admit(s) some responsibility for an undesirable event but minimize or deny its undesirability"	(Schlenker, 1980, p. 143) Mohamed et al. (1999) (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997)
Organisation Handicapping	A form of defensive IM that provides an explanation for poor performance due to external factors	Mohamed et al. (1999)
Organisation Promotion	"Behaviours that present the organisation as highly competent, effective and successful"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)
Prosocial Behaviour	"Engaging in prosocial actions to atone for an apparent transgression and convince an audience that the actor merits a positive identity"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115) (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997)
Restitution	"Offers of compensation which are extended by the organisation to the offended, injured or otherwise harmed audience"	Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115) Tedeschi and Norman (1985) (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997)
Self-handicapping	Similar to organisation handicapping but carried out at the personal level	(Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997)
Self-promotion	Similar to organisation promotion but carried out at the personal level	(Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997)

OIM Tactics	Definition	Source(s)
Supplication	A form of assertive IM that “portray(s) an image of dependence and vulnerabilities for the purpose of soliciting assistance from others”	(Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997) Mohamed et al. (1999, p. 115)

Appendix 3: Case Study Database

Case Study Database

The information that made up the Case Study Database is as follows:

Section	Sub-section
1. Case study protocol	a) Overview of research project - Research problem and objectives b) Interview procedure - Interview guide and interview questions c) Case description – Brief profile of each case
2. Collection of primary data from interviews	a) Participant list b) Participant information form c) Participant consent form (template) d) Signed participant consent forms (hardcopies) e) Interview audio files f) Transcribed interview files g) Written responses from consumer participants
3. Collection of secondary data from retail websites	21 retail websites owned/managed by study participants
4. Analysis of interview data	Codes and themes generated from interview data
5. Analysis of web content data	Codes and themes generated from web content
6. Triangulation of interview and web content data	Themes corroborated from the two data sources

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

The Interview Guide comprises of the following steps to be taken:

1. Logistics

   To record the following:

   a) Name of participant
   b) Name of online store, URL of website
   c) Date of interview
   d) Place of interview

2. Introduction
   a. Greet the participant.
   b. Brief the participant on the objective of the interview, the research and other details on the participant information form.
   c. Seek the participant's permission to audio-record the interview.
   d. Inform the participant of his/her right to seek clarifications, withdraw at any time, and pause the audio-recording.
   e. Explain the confidentiality and anonymity provisions to the participant.
3. Administrative procedures
   a. Give out the participant information form.
   b. Request the participant to sign consent form and retain the signed copy.
   c. Inform the participant of the beginning of audio-recording.
4. Questioning

   Start the interview by asking questions in order of the question list.
5. Closure

   Thank the participant for sharing.

Appendix 5: Interview Questions with Retailer Participants

Screening Questions:

1. What type of products do you sell online?
2. Is your online store operations based in Singapore? (Yes / No)
3. How many years have your online store been in operation?
4. How many employees do you have?

Interview Questions:

<u>About business objectives</u>

1. What are the business objectives you had in mind when setting up the online store?

<u>About promoting your online store</u>

2. What are the marketing activities you do to promote your online store?
3. What are your company policies on e-marketing strategies?
4. What do you think are fair practices in e-marketing?
5. What motivates you to adopt fair practices?

<u>About challenges & difficulties</u>

6. What do you think are the concerns of online consumers regarding ethics in online shopping?
7. Are any of these concerns a challenge to your e-business? Why?
8. What other challenges or difficult decisions do you face operating an online store?
9. Can you share how do you overcome these challenges and difficulties?

<u>About your products</u>

10. How do you decide what type of information to provide about your product?
11. How do you determine your products are safe for use or consumption?

<u>About pricing</u>

12. How will your customer know the total price to pay (e.g. including shipping, etc)?
13. Under what situations do you change prices?
14. How frequently do you update prices?

About orders

15. How can your customers track their orders?
16. How do you assure your customers that what they received will be what they ordered online?

About communicating with customers

17. How do you usually interact with your customers?
18. How do you make your communication clear to them?
19. How could your customers obtain more information about your company, products etc if they want to?
20. In what ways does it impact your business upon sharing information with your customers?
21. Other than the information published on your website, what other unpublished information can be shared with your customers?
22. Under what circumstances will the withholding of information from customers necessary?

About the owner-manager

23. On a personal level, how did you learn how to do business?
24. What principles do you adopt in doing business?

About the future

25. Going forward, what is your vision or plans for your online store?

Miscellaneous

26. Is there anything that we have not spoken about that you would like to share?

Appendix 6: Survey Questions for Consumer Participants

Online Shopping Survey

Please tell us a little about yourself.

Gender: ○ Male ○ Female

Age Group:
- ○ 21-30
- ○ 31-40
- ○ 41-50
- ○ 51-60
- ○ Above 60

When was the last time you shopped and bought something on the Internet?
- ○ Within the past 1 week
- ○ Within the past 1 month
- ○ Within the past 6 months
- ○ Within the past 1 year
- ○ More than 1 year ago

Let's proceed to the next part of the survey.

The next part is made up of nine sub-parts containing information found on some online shopping websites based in Singapore. Please read through the information and answer the questions that follow.

Part 1

Parts 1(a) to 1(d) contains information about the product sold in different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Part 1(a)

A store displays these awards won on its website:

Part 1(b)

Another store describes their products as:

Voted as our favourite cotton yarn!
A lovely, bunnytail-soft, candy floss-fluffy, pure cotton yarn from Spain in 'pop!' and 'pastel' shades.

Part 1(c)

An online bookstore says this:

Why buy from us?
We stock only the best titles
All our children books are carefully selected on the criterion of nurturing young minds. Some of these books are not easily found in local bookstores as these are indented from overseas in US and UK. And to make sure they are really good, we have done the hard work by ensuring they receive high ratings on popular portals by parents and experts-of-the-field. You can be assured.

Part 1(d)

Another store describes their organic hair product as:

- Certified organic ingredients
- 12 natural oils and extracts
- 100% grey hair coverage
- 100% Ammonia free
- 100% Parabens free

- 100% Resorcinol free
- 100% SLS-free
- Very low PPD content

Questions:

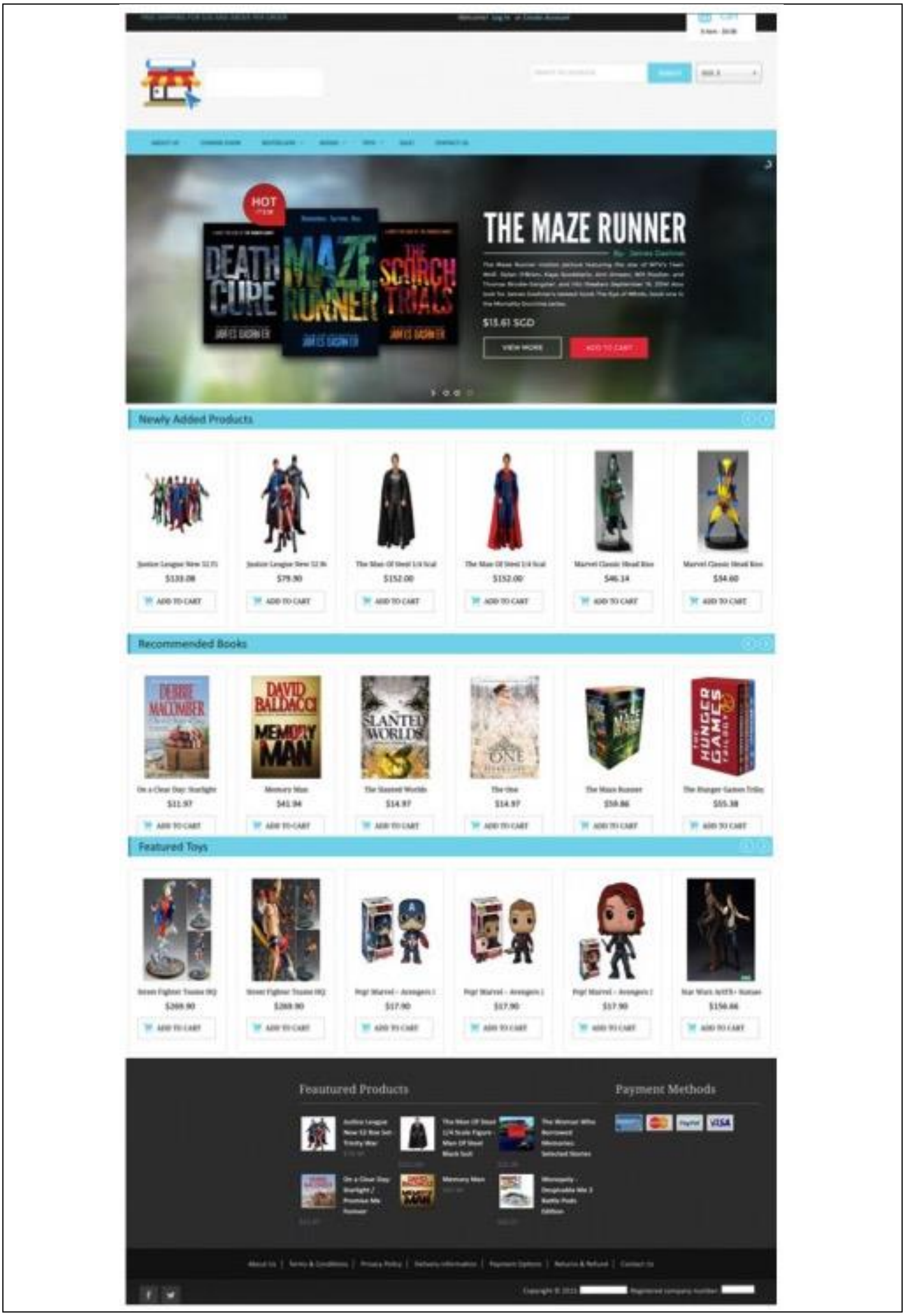
1.1 From the descriptions above, do you think the products are of good quality?
Yes / No
Why?

Part 2
Parts 2(a) to 2(b) are about the overall look-and-feel of the websites of some online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Part 2(a)
Below is the home page of an online store.

Part 2(b)

Below is the home page of a bookstore.



<u>Questions:</u>

2.1 From the look-and-feel of the above home pages, do you think these online stores are big and reputable stores?
Yes / No

Why?

<table>
<tr><td><u>Part 3</u>
Parts 3(a) to 3(d) are about e-payment methods from different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Part 3(a)</u>

PayPal
PayPal is a secured, fast and convenient way to make payments for both International and Singapore customers. Simply follow PayPal's payment instructions and your order will be shipped on the next business day after payment is received.</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Part 3(b)</u>

Payments

Currently, we have 2 modes of payment of which you can choose:
Online order can only use Pay Pal for payment method.
Don't have Pay Pal account? Call us for order through phone order and payment can be done through Internet banking.</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Part 3(c)</u>

Payment

We accept VISA, MasterCard and American Express payments via PayPal, as well as payments via PayPal.</td></tr>
<tr><td><u>Part 3(d)</u>

Payment is accepted in the following modes:
a) Bank transfer
b) PayPal
c) Major credit cards – Visa, MasterCard, American Express</td></tr>
</table>

<u>Questions:</u>

3.1 What is your impression of stores that allow you to pay online through secured channels such as PayPal?

3.2 What makes you feel safe to pay electronically while shopping online?

Part 4

Parts 4(a) to 4(e) are related to the delivery/shipping options of different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Part 4(a)

DOMESTIC DELIVERY
AVAILABLE OPTIONS:

STORE PICK UP

- Free
- Once your order is packed and ready to be picked up, you will receive an email from us.
- Pick up anytime during our operating hours at our retail shop.

LOCAL MAIL

- We would post your products via local mail services.
- We would not be responsible if the mail gets lost in transit although this doesn't happen often in Singapore.

LOCAL REGISTERED MAIL

- We would post your products via local mail services.
- We would post it via registered service which cost $2.24 per order which has better tracking for your order.

SAVER DELIVERY

- Most economical delivery option.
- Suitable for customers who do not have a specific date and time requirement.
- Free delivery for purchases above $80 SGD.
- Mondays & Thursdays between 10am-3pm for South, West and North-West of Singapore.
- Tuesdays & Fridays between 10am-3pm for North, North-East, East of Singapore.
- As this is handled by our own delivery team, it is 99% reliable to arrive in the communicated time.

FLEXI DELIVERY

- Suitable for customers who wish to specify date and time for delivery, including night time, Saturday or Sunday.
- Delivery can be scheduled for 2 working days after date of order placed.
- Need to be pre-paid as the delivery is handled by a courier company.
- We usually use one of the professional courier companies in Singapore to handle the delivery, they do have situations where about 10% of the orders do not arrive during the stated timing.
- If available, a tracking ID would be sent to you once the package has been picked up.
- Follow up has to be done directly with the courier company.

GUARANTEED DELIVERY

- Suitable for customers who wish to have exact date and time for delivery, including night time, Saturday or Sunday.

• Delivery can be scheduled on the same day (cut off time is 3pm) as date of order placed. • Need to be pre-paid as the delivery is handled by a courier company.
<u>Part 4(b)</u> Terms and Conditions Please note that all out going packages are not registered and would advice to have it registered. We will not be responsible for any lost mails or packaging.
<u>Part 4(c)</u> Local Shipping (Within Singapore) Packages lost/stolen/damaged during shipment/handling by the postal service is beyond my control. I regret that I will not be able to take responsibility of shipments lost/stolen/damaged or delayed due to incorrect/insufficient information provided by the customer.
<u>Part 4(d)</u> DELIVERY OPTIONS: 1. Local Mail 2. International Airmail (Registered) 3. Local Hand Delivery (Courier) 4. Self-Collection For packages that are requested to be sent via Registered Mail, another S$2.25 is to be added to postage rates quoted above. The shop will not be responsible for lost packages that are sent via non-registered mail.
<u>Part 4(e)</u> Delivery For all orders below S$50 in Singapore, the Seller shall send all Products by local standard mail at its own costs but shall not be liable if the Product(s) is not delivered. For orders below S$50, should the Buyer request for courier delivery, the Buyer shall bear an additional S$4 per order.

<u>Questions:</u>

4.1 Based on the above information, what is your impression of the above stores?
4.2 Do you think you are partially responsible if you choose non-registered mail and if it gets lost? Yes / No
In this case, do you think the store should <u>not</u> be held responsible? Yes / No

Part 5 Parts 5(a) to 5(d) relates to the processing, shipping and tracking of different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.
Part 5(a) Delivery On average, you should receive your books within 3-7 working days after payment has been received. Once your books have been shipped, we will inform you via email.
Part 5(b) How long does it take to receive my books? All our orders are sent out within 2 working days after we receive your payment. Please allow for another 3 to 5 working days for delivery by SingPost or our courier provider.
Part 5(c) Shipping and Delivery How long will it take for me to receive the packages? 3 -5 working days for normal mail. Courier within the next 2 working days.
Part 5(d) Domestic Delivery • Saver Delivery (by in-house driver): Track our vehicle based on GPS on the delivery day between the stated time at the link provided. • Flexi Delivery (by courier service provider): If available, a tracking ID would be sent to you once the package has been picked up.

Questions:

5.1 What is your impression of the stores that tell you how soon you can receive your items and/or you can track the delivery process?
5.2 What makes you feel that you can trust online stores to deliver your orders?

Part 6

Parts 6(a) to 6(c) is about the returns policies of different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

<u>Part 6(a)</u>

Returns Policy

1. Customers may opt to return most new, unopened items within 30 days.
2. Customer is responsible for the mail during which the returned item is in transit. Registered mailing is highly encouraged.
3. All returns that fall in the following, but not limited to, conditions, will not qualify for full or partial refund:
   a. items is not in its original packaging
   b. item is damaged
   c. item is part of a customisation order or in any way exclusive to the customer
   d. item is partially returned
   e. item is lost in transit
   f. item is in any deemed unsuitable for returns as subjected to the opinion of the seller

<u>Part 6(b)</u>

Exchange & Returns

Any exchange request due to reasonable damage or our error must be submitted to us within 3 working days from the day of receipt, supported by the basis for the request. Items must be returned in their original packaging and condition. The customer shall bear the cost of return mailing.

Promotional and discounted items are not eligible for exchange.

<u>Part 6(c)</u>

Exchange & Returns Policy

- To ensure a smooth exchange or return, please inform us within 3 days of products received and exchanges need to be made within 7 days (local).
- Please email us with your name, phone number, order number and reason for return or exchange.
- All products that are being returned must be in the same condition as received. We will not accept opened or partially used items unless there is a manufacturer's defect.
- All delivery or shipping cost associated with the exchange or return would be covered by the customers.
- We will gladly accept any exchanges (except those stated above) that are fully sealed and are in the same condition as received within 7 days with no question asked.
- Please verify your order when you receive your products.

Questions:

6.1 Based on the above information, do you think it is easy or difficult to ask for return or exchange of purchased items? Why?

6.2 "No-questions-asked" return policy is pretty common in countries such as the United States, but is less common in Singapore.
As a consumer, what is your impression of local online stores that do not offer "no-questions-asked" return policy?

Part 7

Parts 7(a) to 7(b) are about the privacy policies of different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Part 7(a)

P R I V A C Y   P O L I C Y

Your Privacy

Our store is totally committed to protecting the privacy of our site visitors and customers. We fully appreciate and respect the importance of privacy on the Internet. We will not disclose information about our customers to third parties except where it is part of providing a service to you - e.g. arranging for a product to be sent to you, carrying out credit and other security checks.

Your Consent

We will not sell your name, address, e-mail address, credit card information or personal information to any third party (excluding partners from whom you may have linked to our site) without your permission.

Communication & Marketing

If you have made a purchase from our store we may occasionally update you on our latest products, news and special offers via e-mail, post or telephone.

All members of our store have the option to opt-out of receiving marketing communications from us and/or selected third parties. If you do not wish to continue to receive marketing from us and/or selected third parties you should opt-out by clicking on the "unsubscribe" link in our email communications to you.

What are Cookies?

A cookie is a small information file that is sent to your computer and is stored on your hard drive. If you have registered with us then your computer will store an identifying cookie which will save you time each time you re-visit our website, by remembering your email address for you. You can change the settings on your browser to prevent cookies being stored on your computer without your explicit consent.

Transfers of your Information

The information that we collect from you may be transferred to, and stored with, a third party, including Mailchimp and other third-party services we may use. Such processing

may, for example, be required in order to fulfill your order, process your payment details or provide support services. Unfortunately, the transmission of information via the Internet is not completely secure. We will do our best to protect your personal data, but cannot guarantee the security of data transmitted to our site; any transmission is at your own risk. Once we have received your information, we will use strict procedures and security features to try to prevent unauthorised access. Third party sites Our site may contain links to and from the websites of our partner networks, advertisers and other third parties. If you follow a link to any of these websites, please note that they have their own privacy policies and that we do not accept any responsibility or liability for these policies. Please check these policies before you submit any personal data to these websites. Your details and password Upon setting up an account with us, you are advised to keep your account name, email and password safe and secure. We would strongly recommend that you do not use the browser's password memory function, as that would permit other people using your terminal to access your personal information.
Part 7(b) Privacy Policy Your privacy is important to us. To protect your privacy we provide this notice explaining our online information practices and the choices you can make about the way your information is collected and used. The Information We Collect: This notice applies to all information collected or submitted on this website. On some pages, you can order products, make requests, and register to receive materials. The types of personal information collected at these pages include Name, Address, Email address, Phone number. On some pages, you can submit information about other people. For example, if you order a gift online and want it sent directly to the recipient, you will need to submit the recipient's address. In this circumstance, the types of personal information collected include Name, Address, Email address, Phone number. The Way We Use Information: We use the information you provide about yourself when placing an order only to complete that order. We do not share this information with outside parties except to fulfill the order. We use the information you provide about someone else when placing an order only to ship the product and to confirm delivery. We do not share this information with outside parties except to fulfill the order.

We use return email addresses to answer the email we received. Such addresses are not used for any other purpose and are not shared with outside parties. You can register with our website if you would like to receive our catalog as well as updates on our new products and services. Information you submit on our website will not be used for this purpose unless you fill out the registration form.

Our Commitment To Data Security:
To prevent unauthorized access, maintain data accuracy, and ensure the correct use of information, we have put in place appropriate physical, electronic, and managerial procedures to safeguard and secure the information we collect online. Your information input is done within a secured site using the latest SSL technologies.

How You Can Access Or Correct Your Information:
You can access all your personally identifiable information that we collect online and maintain by logging in and clicking on my account in the above menu. We use this procedure to better safeguard your information.

Your acceptance of this privacy policy
By using this site, we assume that you have read the privacy policy and understood its meaning. If you do not agree with the facts stated in this policy then we recommend that you do not use this website.

Changes to this Policy
We reserve the right to change this policy at any time by posting changes on this site. Your continued use of the resources on this site after the changes have been posted constitutes your acceptance of this policy as modified by the posted changes.

All rights reserved.
Last revised: Jan 2012

Questions:

7.1 What is your impression of an online store that has a privacy policy?
7.2 What is your impression of an online store that does not have a privacy policy?
7.3 Do you read the privacy policies of the online stores you buy from?
Yes / No
Why?

Part 8
Parts 8(a) to 8(c) contains information about the sellers from different online stores. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Part 8(a)

About Us

My father was diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes over 15 years ago. As is typical of many Singaporeans of that generation, his lack of English language skills meant that his ability to understand much of the Diabetes literature and information was very limited. The concept for our shop, an Asian focused diabetes lifestyle company, grew from my experience gathering information and support to help with my father’s condition in Singapore.

[A photograph of the founder’s father is displayed on the website but is not included here.]*

Founder and Her Pillars of Strength

[*A photograph of the female founder is displayed on the website but is not included here*.*]

A problem solver by nature who has lived in multiple countries like Japan, China and Australia for years implementing sap projects, loves travelling and adventures. When the founder got married and gave birth to her 2nd son, she saw 2 problems. One - diabetics in Singapore are not getting the same products range in Singapore as compared to the more developed world. Two - she would prefer not to work on a full time job with 2 young boys. The solution came in the form of an online shop.

[*A photograph of the parents of the female founder is displayed on the website but is not included here*.*]

Any entrepreneur journey is not easy. My pillars of strength - my parents were with me all the way with our shop. They are there giving support and help every bit of the way. They are my trusted delivery team, models, logistic team, rice tasting test team etc. In the initial days, when we were testing out vacuum packing the rice for our customers, my mother was even helping out with the rice packing itself.

My mother has passed away on 17th November 2015 due to lung cancer. I wish she could be here to witness our business expanding and growing. For the next appropriate product development, I would love to put her name there. "Thank you for your all love, help and support, mother!"

**[Note: Photographs are not included in this survey for confidentiality reasons*.]

Part 8(b)

Welcome to our Shop

I sincerely appreciate you stopping by!

[*A photograph of the female owner with her three children is displayed on the website but is not included here*.]

Meryl Lee*
Mom to Gabriel (15), John (10), Paul (Stillborn~8) & Paulina (6)
Professional Marriage & Family Therapist / Breastfeeding Counsellor / Certified Postnatal Doula

*[*Note: The name has been changed in this survey for confidentiality reasons.]*

Part 8(c)

Welcome to WS* Catholic Books

Address: Blk 88 Reading Lane, #01-23, Singapore 012388.
Hours: 11am to 7pm, Tuesday to Saturday. Sunday and Monday closed.
SMS/Whatsapp: 65-91234567.

About Us
WS Catholic Books was started on 8 Dec 1993 by Patrick & 3 Catholic friends.

*[*Note: The name, address and phone number has been changed in this survey for confidentiality reasons.]*

Questions:

8.1 Does the above information about the seller or owner make you think they are authentic and not a scam? Yes / No
Why?

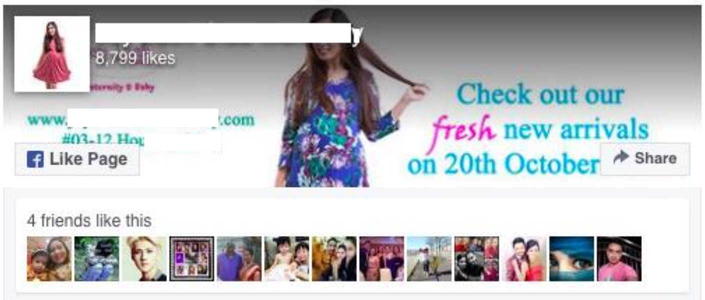
8.2 Do you feel more confident to buy from an unfamiliar online shop for the first time, after knowing more about its owner?
Yes / No
Why?

Part 9

Parts 9(a) to 9(c) are about different online stores on social media. Please read and answer the questions that follow.

Parts 9(a)

A store displays a link to its Facebook page on its website, showing 8,799 likes.



Parts 9(b)

Another store also displays a link to its Facebook page with 2,200 likes:

Parts 9(c)

A third example:

Questions:

9.1 Will you have more trust in an online store that is active on social media (e.g. having a few thousand likes, posting regularly etc)? Yes / No
Why?

9.2 Are you more likely to buy from unfamiliar online stores if they are on social media, e.g. Facebook? Yes / No
Why?

Many thanks for taking time to answer this survey ☺

Appendix 7: An Example of Web Content Collection

Below is an example of web content collection based on the data gathered from Participant GT's online store.

Information Categories	Web content data
1. Product	1. Product category: Mainly food and beverage, a smaller range of mouth care, foot care, medical devices, coolers 2. Functional description, links to more product information 3. Physical attributes – shipping weight 4. Contents – captured in image 5. Image – multiple images, enlarge/zoom in 6. Manufacturer 7. Product expiration date 8. Inventory level (units in stock) 9. Product review – function to write review 10. Product comparison function
2. Shipping	Detailed information on domestic delivery & international shipping on: - Delivery options - Shipping fee - Estimated delivery time - Tracking of package - Extent of risk of lost mail
	Domestic delivery options: - Store pickup – no delivery fee - Local unregistered mail – for selected products only; no delivery fee; Seller not responsible for lost mail - Local registered mail – for selected products only; buyer to pay S$2.24; Able to track package - Saver delivery (in-house delivery team) – highly reliable; able to track delivery vehicle on website; free delivery if above S$80; scheduled delivery day, time, location - Flexi delivery (by courier company) – Buyer can state exact delivery date; Able to track; About 10% of missed deliveries; Buyer has to deal with courier company - Guaranteed delivery (by courier company) – same day delivery (before 3pm); Buyer can state exact delivery date
	International shipping options: - SingPost Airmail – orders below 2kg; Able to track but delayed updates; Transit time can be estimated; No insurance coverage

Information Categories	Web content data
	- SpeedPost Standard – orders up to 30kg; Ship by air; Immediate online tracking; Transit time can be estimated; Insurance coverage up to S$90 - SpeedPost Economy – orders up to 30kg; Ship by sea; Immediate online tracking; Transit time between 3 to 15 weeks; Insurance coverage up to S$90 - DHL – orders up to 50kg; Ship by air; Immediate online tracking; Transit time is about 2 to 3 working days; May be subjected to remote delivery surcharge of S$36 - Other modes – buyers to contact seller directly
3. Payment	Accept credit cards (MasterCard & Visa). Displays credit card logos on home page.
4. Store policy	1. Exchange and Returns Policy "No Questions Asked" policy is subjected to: (i) item being fully sealed, (ii) in original condition, (iii) within 7 days Procedures: - Inform store within 3 days of receipt of products - Email store with details (name, phone number, order number, reason for exchange of return) - Exchange made within 7 days (local customers) or 15 days (international customers) - Buyer pays for shipping cost for exchange or returned items - Local customers can visit retail shop for exchange or return Physical condition of product: - Accepts fully sealed items & in original condition. Does not accept opened or partially used items. - Only if damaged or defective
	2. Terms and Conditions (also labelled as Conditions of Use) – long, cluttered, written in a legal language and difficult to read (2,977 words) Organized by sections: - Use of services - Password - Privacy - Content of services - Restrictions on content and use of services - Intellectual property

Information Categories	Web content data
	- Copyright policy - Termination - Services available "As Is" - Links - Indemnity - Limitation of Liability - Exclusions - Waiver and severability - Controlling law and jurisdiction - Entire agreement - Contacting us
5. Privacy policy	Long, and difficult to read (737 words) Organized by sections: - Personal identification information - Non-personal identification information - Web browser cookies - How we use collected information - How we protect your information - Sharing your personal information - Changes to this privacy policy - Your acceptance of these - Terms - Contacting us - Includes the last updated date of policy
6. Seller / Store	1. About Us - Short story about how the store started - Short story about the founder, her children & her parents - 5 values of store: quality products, affordable pricing, integrity, clear & transparent, Asian focused - Photo of owner and parents - Link to newspaper article about the store & owner - First name of owner, link to owner's LinkedIn page 2. Contacts - Mobile phone number at top left of homepage - At bottom of every page: address of retail store, email address, mobile phone, Skype ID - "Contact Us" section has an online contact form
7. Web store functionality	Shopping cart (Cart summary showing number of items and total cost of items) Search / Advanced Search

Information Categories	Web content data
	Language option (English & Chinese) Customer account creation & management
8. Social media links	Twitter feeds on homepage Links to Twitter & Facebook
9. Overall web design	Structured and organized in a grid layout; resembles websites of big grocer retailers On homepage: animated slider; left panel lists product categories, new products and specials; right panel lists the bestsellers, medical devices for diabetes, product reviews, Tweets; Product listing in middle of the page (3 in a row)
10. Miscellaneous	1. Featured write-ups 2. Sitemap 3. Number of webpages: 72

Appendix 8: Generation of open and axial codes for the theme "Determining entrepreneurial motivation"

Selected Interview Data	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Code
"The main objective is to pass time, because I was taking care of my kid. I could do something that I like, on the side."	Pass time Take care of children Do on the side	Sideline business	Determining entrepreneurial motivation
I am actually a counsellor, not really an entrepreneur	Not entrepreneur		
"Profit was not the first thing in mind because I was not going very big"	Less profit-oriented		
"The online store itself is not the main focus"	Not a focus	Extension of core business	
"The online store is just one section of our business. we were not expecting our online store was going to be the bread and butter"	Secondary business		
"the online store [is an] extension of what we do, that is one of the platforms"	An extension		
"the margin is bigger, you don't have to share give it to the retailers"	Bigger margin	Bigger profit margin	
"You get to earn the full margin, you don't have to share it with the wholesaler."	Improve profit margin		
"when all these costs exceed the margin in which sales bring in, maybe it's time to call it a day."	Possibility of closing down	Attitude towards business growth	
".. to widen the variety of our products .. broadening the diversity of the product range"	Broaden product assortment		
"Expansion is definitely in our plan. We are definitely looking into full-fledged retail."	Ambition to expand		

Appendix 9: Generation of open and axial codes for the theme "Deriving information tactics"

Selected Web Content Data	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Selective Code
• Long privacy policies of some websites ranging from over 400 to 1900 words • Long Terms and Conditions, or Terms of Sales on websites ranging from 900 to 3,150 words	Elaborated policies Detailed terms	Extensive elaboration (Reveal information)	Deriving information tactics
• Instructional videos on the use of baby slings and installation videos for elderly bed rails • Photography on product (bag) from various angles – front, side, top, bottom, and when in use • Large, bold fonts in contrasting colours e.g. "FREE SHIPPING"	Use of videos Use of professional photography Use of graphics to grab attention	Visual amplification (Dramatise information)	
• Repeated use of the word 'organic' twenty times in the ingredient list of a concealer cosmetic product • Use of the word "CHEAPEST" following what was described as "affordable pricing"	Repeated keywords Superlatives adjectives	Language exaggeration (Dramatise information)	
• Names of colours of nail polish: e.g. Woodstock (green), democrat (red), A Midsummer Night's Dream (purple) • Creative description of print patterns on dresses, e.g. abstract black, abstract blue	Figurative names Creative renaming	Figurative reinterpretation (Dramatise information)	
• Size measurements for maternity dresses are unavailable • Expiry date for perishable food items are unavailable on website • Expiry date for some skincare products are unavailable	Product nature Popularity of product Store strategy Volume of information	Selective disclosure	
• Absence of privacy policy on several retail websites • No labels of original product brand	Totally left out	Complete omission (Conceal information)	

Appendix 10: Data triangulation of interviews and web content to show the derivation of a reputable store image

Data Triangulation		Impression Management Tactic (Open codes)		Store Image (Axial code)
Selected Interview Data	**Selected Web Content Data**	**First level**	**Second level**	
"when you receive recognition.. in the form of a good testimonial"	Three awards were displayed on every single page of a website – Best one-stop shop for nursing needs in 2011 and 2012, and award-winning nursing product.	Highlight awards and customer testimonials	By emphasising high quality and/or de-emphasising average or low quality	Appearing reputable
"I would tell people these [products] are the really good ones.. and I recommend them."	A retailer describes her bags as "a little slice of heaven", "flaunting an urban sophistication" and "the ultimate baby bag in disguise".	Write compelling product reviews and descriptions		
"We also provide pictures of table setting, so that people can visualise how it is used"	A retailer puts up 9 professionally taken photographs of a product from different angles.	Present professional product photography		
"if a brand is about a natural and organic product, we will list all the ingredients. For another brand.. we will not list the full ingredients"	One retailer displays a longer list of ingredients, which emphasises the organic nature of a line of products, compared to the non-organic products sold in the store.	Selective disclosure of product attributes		
	A retailer uses the grid layout to maximise the display of products by categorising them into new products, specials, best sellers and so on.	Display a full page of products	By emulating professionalism in websites of big retailers	
	Several retailers use animated sliders of pretty images on their website's homepage to catch visitors' attention.	Adopt web design of big retailers		

Appendix 11: Data triangulation of interviews and web content to show the derivation of a legitimate store image

Data Triangulation		Impression Management Tactic (Open codes)		Store Image (Axial code)
Selected Interview Data	**Selected Web Content Data**	**First level**	**Second level**	
"There is a picture of me and my mobile number is there."	A few retailers disclose their first names (e.g. Peter), post photographs of themselves or with their family (e.g. children, parents). Others have shared stories of how they started their online stores.	Reveal seller's face, name and family; Share stories about the store's beginnings	By strategically disclosing seller's information	Appearing legitimate
"We have a physical shop. Customers know if they can't find me online, they can go to the shop to look fro us." "Being able to be contacted by the customer, whether by email or by address will be good."	One website listed four ways to get in touch with them – via the retail store address, email address, mobile phone number, and Skype address.	Provide multiple means of contact		
"I think IG [Instagram] is very important, because when I chat with some of my customers, other potential customers looking at these chats realized that I'm a real person."	A few stores display the Facebook 'Facepile' feature showing a few thousand 'Likes' and familiar faces of friends who have liked their page.	Place links to social media; Display a following of fans ('Likes') and news feeds from social media	By drawing attention to social relationships within an online community	

Appendix 12: Data triangulation of interviews and web content to show the derivation of a trustworthy store image

Data Triangulation		Impression Management Tactic (Open codes)		Store Image (Axial code)
Selected Interview Data	**Selected Web Content Data**	**First level**	**Second level**	
"It is very important.. because people will generally feel very vulnerable when they purchase anything online. This will at least let our clients have a peace of mind"	Examples on websites declaring the importance of consumer data privacy: "Your privacy is important to us" "totally committed to protecting the privacy of our site visitors and customers" Two of the websites has the longest privacy policy with 1920 and 1142 words.	Provide lengthy privacy policies to explain how stores protect consumer privacy	By proclaiming commitment to privacy promises	Appearing trustworthy
"I will provide three statuses. The first email is to verify their order has been received. The second email [informs] the order has been processed. Once they have made a payment, that is when we will drop them another reply to say that their package has been shipped, with the delivery date and the tracking number if they opt for registered mail."	Examples on websites are: "Your order will be shipped the next business day after the full amount has been received." "On average you should receive your books within 3-7 working days after payment has been received."	Manage buyer's expectation of delivery timeline; Provide timely updates on order processing and allow tracking of package	By proclaiming commitment to order fulfilment	
"PayPal is one of the most widely used systems" "Coming from the perspective of a buyer, as well as a seller, if a shop use PayPal, I feel so much safer."	One website explains: "PayPal is a secured, fast and convenient way to make payments for both International and Singapore customers."	Display symbols of trusted affiliates such as PayPal; Explain security of e-payment on website	By appealing to institutional trust	

Appendix 13: Data triangulation of interviews and web content to show the derivation of an assertive store image

Data Triangulation		Impression Management Tactic (Open codes)		Store Image (Axial code)
Selected Interview Data	**Selected Web Content Data**	**First level**	**Second level**	
"So the onus is on you as a buyer to decide. Do you want registered mail? If you want, you can purchase it. You have an option."	One website surveyed provides 5 options for local delivery and 4 options for international delivery. Each delivery option described the shipping fee, expected delivery time, and availability of parcel tracking in detail.	Providing details on delivery options		
"We always encourage customers to opt for registered mail."	Examples found on websites: "‥ the professional courier company ‥ do have situations where about 10% of the orders do not arrive during the stated timing. "The shipment is delivered to your doorstep and needs to be signed for."	Dispensing advice and reminders		
"Lost mail is something that poses challenges to us. That's why we have very clear terms and conditions on our website that if you opt for normal mail, there's risk, and we are not liable for any lost mail in such circumstances."	Examples on websites: "Packages lost/stolen/ damaged during shipment/handling by the postal service is beyond my control. I regret that I will not be able to take responsibility for shipments lost/stolen/ damaged or delayed due to incorrect/insufficient information provided by the customer."	Issuing disclaimers and warnings	By transferring agency prior to the occurrence of an unsuccessful delivery	Appearing assertive
"I think it is important to put your store policies upfront. For me as an online shop, I need to make my store policies clear. If you buy from me, as long as the purchase is completed, it means you have accepted all these policies"	One website stated: "All sales are final and are not exchangeable or refundable." Several stores specified the product condition and exchange procedures. For example, exchanges are accepted if due to manufacturer defects or damages. The exchange procedures may require proof of purchase, informing and exchanging within a specified period of time, and for buyers to bear the return delivery fee.	Stating multiple stipulated criteria for product exchanges	By appearing bureaucratic in anticipation of buyers seeking redress	

Appendix 14: Case Descriptions of the Online Stores

This section contains brief descriptions of the online stores and their storeowners who participated in this study. The purpose of this section is to provide an understanding of the stores as depicted on the stores' websites.

There is a story behind each and every of the online stores that participated in this study, and waiting to be unfolded. Their stories are written in the form of short case descriptions in this thesis, based on the researcher's interactions with the participants during the interviews and from the analysis of the websites. The purpose of the case descriptions is to provide an understanding of the store through an overview of the store's key products, store specialty, the customer segment it serves, the background of the founders or owners, a peek into how the store was born as well as the overall website design and web functionalities. The store name is 'anonymized' with a prefix of their owner's initials (for example, Participant AL is the owner of AL_STORE) to maintain anonymity of the store and the study participants.

14.1 AC_STORE: The art of scrapbooking

With the belief in "creating complexity through simplicity", the founders of AC_STORE, a young couple in their twenties (their names anonymized as AC and MT), set up the "pure clicks" store in the hope of sharing their passion on scrapbooking and turning their hobby into a business. The online store serves as a one-stop arts and craft supplies shop selling ready-made cards, blank papers, tags, ink sets, tools and many others. Emphasizing on being original and handmade, the store offers customization and digital designing service to create personalized cards for special occasions such as wedding celebrations. In showing their support for fellow local artists, the founders welcome photograph submission of artworks, which will be posted to the site's Gallery page to enjoy free online publicity.

The website has a simple design with an animated slider of product images that attracts visitors' attention and product categories organized in a grid layout. Each product item is accompanied by an "Add to Cart" button or allows the visitor to "Find Out More" or "Choose Options". The store invites its web visitors to browse customers' reviews about them through the links provided to Qoo10, Carousel and Facebook, as well as to connect with them via social media on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram.

14.2 AL_STORE: Natural health and beauty

As a “pure clicks” store that sells exclusively online, AL_STORE has been operating as a family-run business for more than 10 years. With a tagline “natural health and beauty”, the store specialises in organic skincare, aromatherapy, food and beverage products. It also stocks a small selection of books, water distillers, eco-friendly household cleaners and organic pet care cleansers. The store was set up as a result of the founder, whom as a mother, sought natural food products for her children, in place of the processed and synthetically-made products commonly available in most supermarkets. According to the founder, she sourced for food products based on the best value offers and that the products do not contain any preservatives, artificial colouring or flavouring. The store also promises to play a part in minimising environmental damage.

The store’s homepage design comprises of an animated slider of featured and new products. The web store offers the standard functionalities of a typical e-commerce site such as a shopping cart, search function, online chat, account creation and management and newsletter signup. The tracking of orders is embedded within the site, so that customers need not leave the site to trace the status of the shipping at another website.

14.3 AS_STORE: A virtual club for expectant mothers

AS_STORE is a bricks-and-clicks online store selling maternity wear for pregnant women. Targeting the local mass market, its maternity clothes are priced reasonably under S$100, making it affordable for the middle working class women. The store also carries a smaller range of apparel for nursing mothers and newborn babies. Visitors to the website can learn about the two co-founders who started their business and friendship through their children from ‘Our Story’ featured on the store’s website. The physical shop provides a meeting place for expectant mothers while the online store resembles a virtual club. The lady entrepreneurs sign off their first names (abbreviated as AK and KL) and post a photo of themselves.

Simple and conventional, the AS_STORE website is structured into four major sections of ‘Our Story’, ‘Shop’, ‘Contact Us’ and ‘FAQ’, which made navigating the website easy. Centralized on the home page is an animation of images featuring new arrivals at its flagship retail store, a big collage of maternity dresses and the current promotion for a maternity bundle of items. Besides the shopping cart, the website hosts an online contact form and proudly displays links to its Facebook fan page with over 8,000 ‘Likes’.

14.4 BL_STORE: Books for the little ones

BL_STORE brands itself as 'Singapore's online bookstore for the young', that is, children up to 15 years old. The founder explains the origin of her store name on the 'About Us' page on its website, and likens it to the way she views her children as 'little ones'. She first observed the difficulty faced by Singaporean children from English-speaking families in learning Chinese. Being a parent herself, she is keen to instil the love of reading in her children by providing a nurturing environment with good books. BL_STORE was therefore set up with the objective of providing parents with a wide variety of Chinese storybooks that emphasises good educational content and the teaching of moral values.

The website is bilingual and is written in a mix of English and Chinese languages. The home page is neatly categorized into four reader age groups: 0-3 years old, 4-6 years old, 7-9 years old and 10-15 years old. Large images of newly arrived books fill up the centre space of the home page. Clicking on the links of the book images brings the web visitor to its online store hosted on Qoo10 marketplace, as its website does not have a shopping cart.

14.5 DC_STORE: Planet-friendly and cruelty-free to pets

As the first planet-friendly and cruelty-free pet supplies store in Singapore, DC_STORE emphasises the selling of ethical pet products. A young couple (one of which is Participant DC) started the online store in 2012, followed by a physical shop in 2015 specializing in pet grooming services. The online store sells accessories, grooming toys, treats, and training aid for dogs and cats as well as cleaning products and greeting cards. Customers are welcomed to make donations to a local animal shelter by purchasing the items needed by the shelter at 15% off the usual price. In line with its tagline of "all things being a conscious pet guardian", the store advocates educating the public about environmental issues, by using planet-friendly pet products and being a carbon dioxide neutral website. On the home page of the site is an animated slider introducing hypoallergenic gears, healthy pet food, grooming services and workshops. Featured and new products are displayed on the home page that can be easily added to cart with a click. A shopping cart, user account management, newsletter signup and link to the blog are part of the web functionalities. The bricks-and-clicks store is active on social media networks including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

14.6 DI_STORE: A love for yarn

DI_STORE, a "pure clicks" shop, specialises in unique yarns for knitting and crocheting. The founder introduces herself by her first name (anonymized to 'DI') on the 'About' page. She started the small home-based business in 2013 and proclaims that 'spreading hookiejoy and yarnlove' is her aim. Her key business goal is to provide a wide range of high quality, value-for-money yarn that is premier, special and rare. Thus she sources for unusual yarns all over the world and imports them so as to complement the existing offerings in Singapore. The sole proprietor also sells Do-It-Yourself kits, hooks and other accessories in her online store.

The home page of DI_STORE website is simple and minimalistic. Pictures of beautifully crocheted laces, brightly coloured balls of yarns and pretty accessories are the centrepieces of the home page. One can easily navigate to the other parts of the website through its links to products page, promotions, store policy, contact, and a write-up about the store. The store provides the usual web functionalities, which includes a shopping cart hosted on the Big Cartel e-marketplace, search and subscription to newsletters. Visitors can socially connect to the store through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

14.7 ES_STORE: Reading nurtures young minds

ES_STORE is a bilingual home-based online bookstore that starts off by selling English and Chinese books. Over the years it has expanded its offerings to other educational products including DVDs, crafts, hobbies, and gifts for children. The founder shares on the website's 'About Us' page that she discovers the joy and magic when she reads a book aloud to her two children. The magic comes alive when there is fun and cuddles between parents and children while reading interactive and visually appealing books. As she sources for books to build her home library, she also discovers the demand for value-for-money and good quality children books by other parents. With the aim of 'nurturing young minds', as reflected in their slogan, the online store was set up to meet similar needs of Singaporean parents by offering high quality books for children from birth to age 7.

On the website home page, parents can choose from a list of book categories, age of readers and book formats. Prominently highlighted are images of the latest books, featured books and popular book series. Besides a shopping cart, the other functionalities of the website includes search, members login, new members' creation of account, subscription to mailing list, and an online contact form.

14.8 GT_STORE: Caring for the diabetics

The GT_STORE is a bricks-and-clicks grocer that sells diabetic-friendly food and lifestyle products. Besides low glycaemic index (GI) rice, biscuits and ice cream, the store also stocks up on glucometers, test strips and other medical-related devices. The founder started her online businesses in 2010, catering specifically to the aging diabetic population in Singapore, after she discovered a shortage of diabetics-friendly food in local major supermarkets. The store's five company values are described as: first, sourcing for quality products from reputable suppliers and using their own products too; second, affordable prices for everyone; third, selling with integrity; fourth, clarity and transparency in everything they do; and fifth, catering to the specific needs of the Asian market.

The GT_STORE website spots a fairly professional-looking design which resembles that of large supermarket grocery stores. An animated banner on its home page features special products and selected products on sale. Products are neatly organized according to categories, bestsellers, new products, product reviews, specials, and brands, which makes browsing easy. Besides the search function, the website also provides a product comparison feature. In demonstrating the store's tagline "because we care", the website has a language toggle function that enables the older generation visitors who are less literate in English to switch the site to display in Chinese characters.

14.9 IS_STORE: Organic hair care for swimmers

The IS_STORE specialises in salon-grade hair and body care products, especially for children and swimmers. Targeting a niche segment of customer needs, its organic products are specially formulated for babies, young children aged below 12 as well as young athletics. The company's main business is a product distributor that sells to local retail stores and hair salons. Apart from distributorship, it operates a 'clicks-only' online store. The online store's website is simple yet functional. The website lists the products in three different ways – by brand, category, and the target user (women, men, children and athletes). Central to the homepage is a banner of advertisements for its products, loyalty program, wholesale and distribution, as well as products on sale. The functionalities available on its website include search, shopping cart, member login, newsletter subscription, and links to social media networks (Facebook). The owners share a brief history of the store on the 'About' page of its website. The name of the website was adopted from the same name of the family salon that the owners had previously operated. With a wealth of experience in the salon hair care business, the owners have a thorough understanding of what is required to take good care of hair.

14.10 JE_STORE: Pure and organic skincare

As an online cosmetics shop that sells all natural skincare and beauty products, JE_STORE places great emphasis on the organic nature of the product and its ingredients. Unlike many skin-care products sold in pharmacies and cosmetic stores, the ingredients that go into the manufacturing of the store's products are food-grade. Not only are the products are concentrates without thickeners and emulsifiers, they are gluten-free and derived from rice bran. Due to the lack of synthetic chemicals, chemical preservatives, artificial fragrances, artificial colouring, harsh detergents or toxins in its products, they are also safe for children's use. The franchisee of an established American brand, takes pride in not involving animals in the product testing and manufacture process.

The website adopts a clean look-and-feel, with white background, light grey headers, therefore reflecting the purist image of its line of products. Central to the homepage is the store's new line of products and the current ongoing promotions. Besides a neat categorization of the store's products, the website offers standard functionalities including member login, shopping cart and search. Although the absence of the usual 'About Us' page leaves little clue about the founder, she leaves behind her name in her email address, as well as her mobile phone and office address.

14.11 JH_STORE: Joy in stamp carving

Founded in 2007 on Etsy handmade marketplace, JH_STORE remains a "pure clicks" store that sells stamp-carving supplies, including rubber blocks, stamping ink, carving knives, books, storage boxes and DIY kits. The founder, a previous high school teacher turned housewife, started the shop as a sideline business to supplement her income. She describes the little time she had for crafting as she could only afford to lay her hands on the rubber blocks in the wee hours of the night after her children had gone to bed. With the hope of attracting more people to pick up the easy and affordable hobby craft, she conducts workshops where she imparts her knowledge to keen learners. The website design is simple with a full-width banner showing a close-up picture of her carvings. The rest of the page is organized in a grid layout displaying the product classification (personalized stamps, quilling and supplies) and individual product items, accompanied by description and price. Customers are able to request for custom order or contact the shop owner. The name, mail contact and links to social media (Facebook and Instagram) are available on the main page of the website too.

14.12 LL_STORE: Stylish and quality eyewear

LL_STORE is one of the first local optical companies to start an online store. To accomplish their vision as a leading eyewear shop in Singapore and the region, the store's strategy is to offer quality and stylish prescription glasses at affordable prices through its online platform. The store shares that by eliminating the middleman retailer and costly licensing fees, they are able to supply eyeglasses at lower prices. The offer bundle includes a stylish frame, 1.60 aspheric lenses with scratch resistant coating, case and cloth together with free delivery.

Upon entering the website, a popup window appears, offering a discount code for the first time customer. The homepage comprises of a full-width animated slider with photographs of models wearing the store's brands. Besides eyeglasses for both men and women, the online store also sells sunglasses. On the product pages for eyeglasses, web visitors are able to make use of the virtual try-ons and 180 degrees turn of a model's face to help them visualise their look with the selected glasses. A shopping cart, search, online feedback form, newsletter subscription and user account management features are available on the website.

14.13 ML_STORE: Stylish diaper bags

ML_STORE aims to be a one-stop online shop that specialises in stylish designer diaper bags. The store stocks a wide range of styles including backpack, tote, messenger bags, wet bags and other accessories for parents with babies and toddlers. Faced with limited choices and expensive prices, the founder shared on the 'About Us' page on how she went in search for the ideal diaper bag that is fashionable, functional and affordable for parents. The search eventually led to the birth of ML_STORE.

The website mascot, a trendy mother carrying a baby girl on one hand, and a handbag on another, reflects its tagline 'confidence with style'. The use of soft, pastel colours throughout the website gives it a cheerful look. A scrolling banner at the centre of the home page displays the latest promotions, new arrivals, a new collection, and its own in-house loyalty program. The store also provides links to its presence in social media channels and encourages customers to connect with them on Facebook and Instagram. Standard functionalities such as shopping cart, search, member login and newsletter subscription can be found on its website. The founder signs off the 'About Us' page with her first name with a photo of herself.

14.14 MR_STORE: Joy in flipping books

MR_STORE is an online bookstore that specialises in Chinese storybooks for children under 9 years old. The founder, an ex-teacher, welcomes requests for personalized recommendations without the obligation to purchase. Books are sourced around the world with three themes in mind – fun, knowledge and love. The 'fun' books have highly interactive elements, such as pop-ups, pull-outs, lift-the-flaps and peek-a-boo pictures to engage the young readers. 'Knowledge' books contain rich elements of story-telling to assist learning through interesting tales. Books about love impart important values including filial piety, parental and sibling love, sharing and caring, good manners and habits. Each book comes with a personal recommendation on how the book met her expectations, the benefits it brings and the ways to use the book to enrich parents' learning experiences with their children.

The founder started the online store upon an increasing number of friends' requests to purchase high quality and interesting Chinese books for them. The store's website uses a mix of English and Chinese languages. Navigation signs such as 'Home' are displayed in English while each book synopsis and/or review is bilingual. As the site's shopping cart serves only local customers, international buyers are encouraged to email the owner directly.

14.15 NL_STORE: Eco-friendly tableware

With a tagline – 'responsible convenience', NL_STORE sells disposal cutlery that is environmental friendly and made from renewable, sustainable and up-cycled materials. As a socially responsible store, its focus is on tableware products that are biodegradable and compostable. As the products they decompose at a much faster rate than other types of recyclable products. The products made from wood, such as wooden cutlery, paper bags and other products made from wood have obtained certification by the U.S. Forest Stewardship Council for sustainable harvesting.

Not only is its range of forks, spoons, knives, plates, paper straws, takeaway boxes and paper bags eco-friendly, they are also nicely crafted. Simple and functional, its website has the basic functionalities of a shopping cart and newsletter subscription. The home page houses a scrolling banner of its products, recent announcement of office relocation and product stockist at an online grocery store. The store targets the environmentally conscious and 'green' consumers who are willing to pay a premium for using biodegradable cutlery instead of cheaper plastic alternatives. The website is silent about its founder, a sole proprietor, although means of contact, such as email and its showroom location are available.

14.16 PC_STORE: Books and toys for young adults

PC_STORE is a purely online store selling book, toys and games. The store carries a variety of popular toy figurines, fiction and non-fiction book titles. The founder, a young entrepreneur, aims to reach out to customers who are young working adults with similar interests as himself. The store's mission is to provide the best possible services with a large collection of books and games at low prices within an easy-to-use website and through secured online payment. Taking the centre stage of the home page is an animated full screen slider featuring toy figurines and featured books. The rest of the page list new arrivals, recommended books and featured toys, each with an 'Add to cart' button in a neat grid layout, which makes navigation easy. More products are displayed as icons and links at the bottom panel of the page, along with the company registration number.

PC_STORE caters to both domestic and international markets and its website allows buyers to switch between two billing currencies, Singapore (SGD) and US dollars (USD). The website offers standard functionalities include a shopping cart, search and member login. Links to social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, are placed inconspicuously at the bottom left corner of the home page.

14.17 PL_STORE: Traditional baby slings

PL_STORE is a bricks-and-clicks online store that caters to the maternity needs of mothers-to-be and nursing women. The store takes pride in being a wholesale distributor of the popular made-in-Singapore sarong baby sling that has been selling locally since 1997. The store also stocks up other models of baby carriers, baby slings, maternity wear, nursing wear, hospital gowns and baby accessories. They welcome customers to visit their store for clothes fittings, demonstration of the use of slings and self-collection of online purchases. Videos showing the use of baby slings, where the founder personally demonstrates the use of her best-selling product in various carrying positions, can be found on the website. The founder introduces herself and her three children by posting their photo, along with their first names and ages on the home page. Prominently featured on the website are the past awards won, including Best of The Best pregnancy products/services award in 2012, "Mother and Baby" awards in 2011 and 2012. PL_STORE has also established a strong presence on social media, and especially on Facebook, where the fan page has garnered 21,000 ‘Likes’. News feed from Facebook are embedded onto the store’s website showing the most recent activities.

14.18 PT_STORE: Books for the devoted Catholics

PT_STORE is a bricks-and-clicks store operating as both a distributor and retailer in Singapore and Indonesia. Specializing in Catholic books, PT_STORE stocks a collection of about 5,000 titles on Catholic spirituality. Highlighting the retail shop as its flagship, its website prominently displays the address of its physical store, operating hours and a mobile contact number. The main feature of the homepage is the latest collection of 20 books, each with an ‘Add to cart’ button for quick and easy buying, while on the left panel is a list of 10 recommended books. Shipping rates, both local and to Indonesia, are emphasised and all books are priced in Singapore currency (SGD). The website has the typical functionalities of an e-commerce site, including a shopping cart, search, member login and creation of new membership account. On the ‘About Us’ page, the store described their purpose as ‘to help our readers realise their God-gift(ed)ness through the word’. The owner and his three Catholic friends started the bookstore in December 1993, with the dream to make Catholic and Christian literature available and affordable to the local communities, and their dream eventually grew into the book business they are passionate about.

14.19 RH_STORE: Responsibly-sourced organic skincare

As a relatively new beauty and skincare online store started in 2014, RH_STORE differentiates itself by emphasizing five themes about its products: engineered by nature, plant-derived personal care, ethically sourced and never tested on animals. Operated by the founder, who is also the sole proprietor, the store provides beauty solutions for women who are conscious about maintaining a beautiful face, body and hair. Manufactured in Australia and made from organic elements free from excessive chemicals, the products do not compromise the well-being of the skin. The store declares its commitment to social responsibility in two ways, first by donating 10% of its proceeds to the saving and rehabilitation of lives, and secondly, by offering customers a rebate of $2 off their next purchase when they return 3 primary packaging. The homepage of the store not only display the five themes, there are featured products as well as a long list of customer testimonials. The website is McAfee certified secured, indicating the absence of malware, malicious links and phishing. A shopping cart, contact information, and links to social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) and their blog can be found on the site.

14.20 SJ_STORE: A foodie girl cartoon character

SJ_STORE sells lifestyle items featuring cartoon characters, which bear distinctive Singaporean personalities. Designed by the founder, the products feature five cartoon characters named after popular local delicacies. The main character is a girl inspired by a red-coloured pastry shaped like a tortoise shell, which symbolizes good fortune and longevity to the Chinese. Appearing on bags, purses, pouches, stationery and jewellery accessories, each of the cartoon characters have their own personality, hobbies and peculiar habits. The founder aspires to introduce these cartoon characters to a wider audience outside of Singapore.

Designed to appear young and fun, the home page of the web store displays a full screen animation of the main cartoon character and a promotion bundle, all in bright and eye-catching graphics. Besides a shopping cart, its website functionalities include newsletter subscription, and a live chat box. Although there is little information about the founder, the site publishes the project showcases in which the store was involved in the past two years. Web visitors can also connect to the store via links to Facebook and Instagram.

14.21 VK_STORE: Enhancing elderly mobility

Founded in 2011, VK_STORE is one of the first online stores in Singapore to sell eldercare products. According to the two young founders, their business objective is to enhance the quality of senior citizens’ life and enable them to live a higher level of independence. The store stocks about 300 different products, ranging from equipment that assists mobility and other daily activities, such as bathing, reading and exercising. The wide range of products caters to the elderly in various stages of mobility by matching their state of mobility with the appropriate aid. Not only are the products designed to reduce dependence on care-givers, they increase the independence of the elderly by encouraging physical movement so as to slow down the degeneration of muscles.

Set against a white background, the homepage of their website displays an animated slider of images showing a special collection of Singapore-themed designer walking canes, bestsellers and on-sale items. The web functionalities include a shopping cart, search feature, account creation and management, online chat, newsletter signup and a blog. The office and showroom address is displayed on every webpage as the store welcomes visitors to their showroom via appointments.

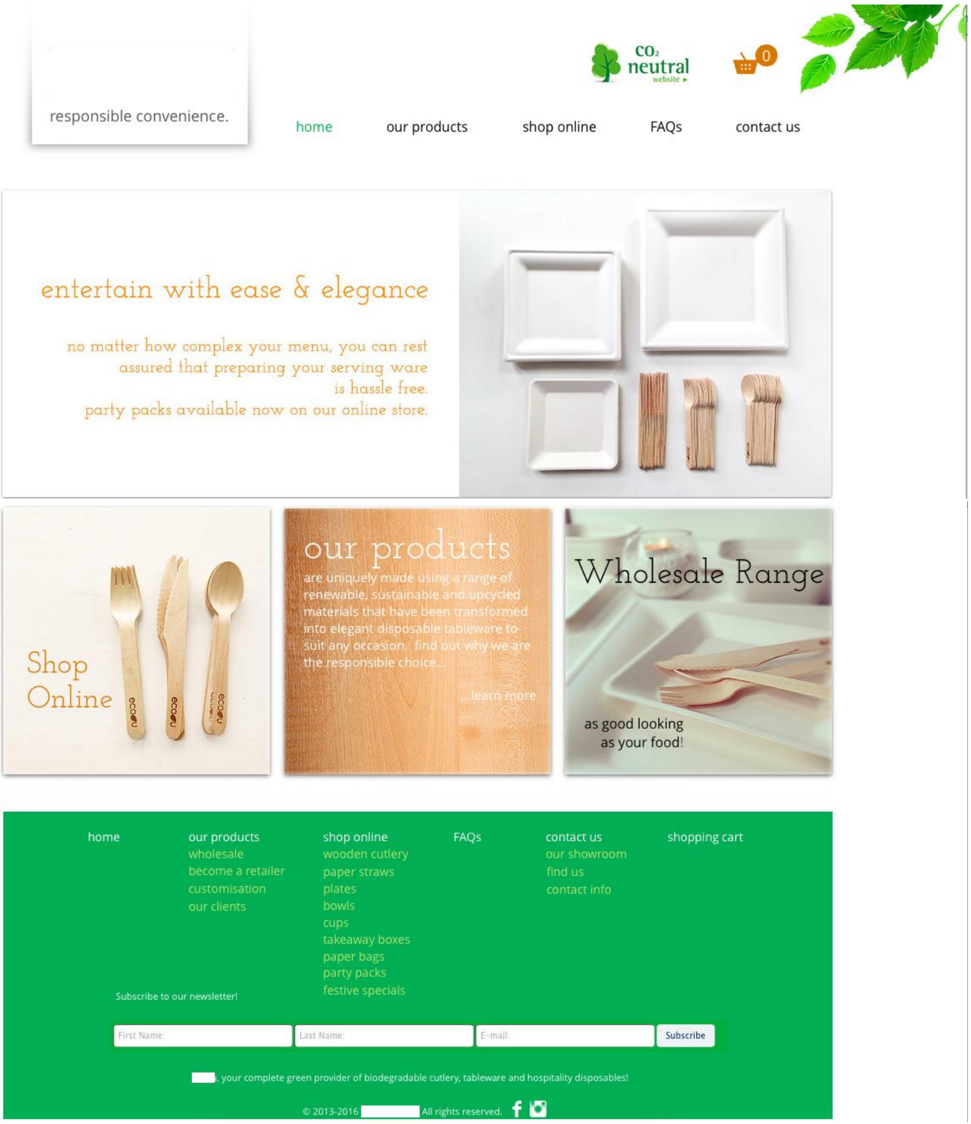
Appendix 15: Online Stores and their Store Images

Store Images	AC	AL	AS	BL	DC	DI	ES	GT	IS	JE	JH	LL	ML	MR	NL	PC	PL	PT	RH	SJ	VK
Reputable	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓
Legitimate	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Trustworthy		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Assertive	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
No. of images projected	3	4	3	2	4	2	3	4	4	2	2	4	4	4	2	4	4	3	3	2	4

Appendix 16: Classification of Online Stores' Web Façade

Web Façade	Online Store
Impressionist (A store that projects all four images)	AL_STORE DC_STORE GT_STORE IS_STORE LL_STORE ML_STORE MR_STORE PC_STORE PL_STORE VK_STORE
Minimalist (A store that projects two or three images)	AC_STORE AS_STORE BL_STORE DI_STORE ES_STORE JE_STORE JH_STORE NL_STORE PT_STORE RH_STORE SJ_STORE

Appendix 16.1: Example of a Minimalist Store's Homepage



Appendix 16.2: Example of an Impressionist Store's Homepage

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