

# Revive Our Kicks: Leveraging Sustainability and Integrated Services to Enhance Retention and Profitability in Irish Startups

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Capstone Project  
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## Submission Forms

### Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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## Table of Contents

<b>Submission Forms .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>1.1 The Irish Startup and SME Landscape.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.2 Expansion into Dry Cleaning &amp; Integrated Services.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>1.3 Personal Motivation and Research Framing .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.4 Research Aim and Focus .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.0 Literature Review .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.1 Key Authors and Studies.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2.2 Perspectives On Industry Growth .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>2.3 Contrasting Viewpoints .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>2.4 Differences in Retention Strategies, Service Frequency &amp; Market Segmentation.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>2.5 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>3.0 Sub-Section 2: Small Business Success in Ireland.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.1 Key Authors and Studies.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>3.2 Synthesis of Perspectives .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>3.3 Research Gaps .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>3.4 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.0 Sub-Section 3: Integration of Multi-Services.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>4.1 Key Authors and Studies.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4.2 Synthesis of Perspectives .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>4.3 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>5.0 Research Question &amp; Objectives .....</b>	<b>24</b>
Main Research Question.....	24
Sub-Questions.....	24
Research Objectives .....	25
<b>6.0 Methodology.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6.1 Research Design: Ethnographic and Qualitative.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>6.2 Sampling Strategy.....</b>	<b>28</b>

<b>6.3 Ethical Considerations.....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6.4 Data Analyis .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>6.5 Limitations .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>7.0 Analysis &amp; Findings .....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>7.1 Customer Loyalty and Relationship Building.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>7.2 The Role of Digital Booking Systems and Convenience.....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7.3 Service Integration and Partnerships.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>7.4 Sustainability and Consumer Priorities .....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>7.5 Summary of the results .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>8.0 Discussion &amp; Conclusion .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>8.1 Recommendations for Revive Our Kicks.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>8.2 Research Limitations and Future Research .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>8.3 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>10.0 References .....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>11.0 Appendices .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Appendix A – Interview Questions .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet.....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Appendix C - Participant Consent Form .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Participant Consent Form.....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Participant Agreement.....</b>	<b>53</b>

## Abstract

This dissertation explores how Revive Our Kicks, a small sneaker cleaning business based in South Dublin, can leverage sustainability and integrated service models to improve customer retention and profitability within Ireland's competitive startup landscape. The study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach, drawing on semi-structured interviews with three participants: a sole trader, a barbershop owner, and a sneaker enthusiast. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, was used to analyse the data and identify key themes.

The findings reveal that customer loyalty is strongly driven by personal relationships, trust, and consistent service quality, rather than pricing or promotions. Digital booking systems have emerged as essential tools for improving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, reflecting a wider shift towards digital convenience in service-based industries. Service integration and partnerships present potential growth opportunities but must be approached cautiously to avoid undermining brand identity. While sustainability is growing in relevance, most customers continue to prioritise price, speed, and convenience, suggesting that eco-friendly practices should be integrated subtly.

Based on these findings, the study recommends that Revive Our Kicks prioritise relationship-building, implement a structured digital booking system, cautiously explore collaborative service models, and incorporate sustainable practices as a secondary value proposition. These insights offer practical recommendations for Revive Our Kicks and may also provide guidance for other small service businesses navigating similar challenges in Ireland's evolving market environment.

## 1.0 Introduction

The aim of this research is to explore how Revive Our Kicks (ROK), a small sneaker cleaning business in South Dublin, can enter a competitive niche by harnessing sustainability and innovative service integration. In recent years, sneaker culture has evolved from a subcultural trend into a major consumer phenomenon where sneakers are not only fashion statements but also valuable assets. This evolution has created a growing demand for specialised, eco-friendly sneaker care. Shoewash Supreme (2024)

However, while the global sneaker market is thriving, small businesses in Ireland face a complex startup environment marked by fierce competition, resource constraints, and the ongoing challenge of ensuring customer retention and profitability Walsh, C. (2025). Serviced-based businesses, especially in South Dublin, need to compete not only on quality but also on convenience, digital presence, and customer loyalty – all while managing tight margins and limited capacity.

This research uses ROK as a case study to explore how small lifestyle businesses can survive and grow in this environment. It focuses specifically on two business strategies: Sustainable Service Delivery and Integrated Services that enhance convenience and repeat engagement.

## 1.1 The Irish Startup and SME Landscape

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) make up over 99% of all active businesses in Ireland and employ around 70% of the private sector workforce (Enterprise Ireland, 2024). Despite this, many Irish startups struggle to reach sustainable growth due to factors like rising operational costs, market saturation, and difficulties in digital marketing & customer acquisition. Enterprise Ireland & Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) offer mentorship and grant support, but not all small businesses find it accessible, especially in fast-moving urban sectors.

This is especially true for niche service providers – including barbershops, cafés and businesses like ROK – where customer retention and brand identity are crucial. These businesses don't just rely on price competition but need to build long term brand trust, stand out through digital marketing & offer seamless, valuable customer experiences.

## 1.2 Expansion into Dry Cleaning & Integrated Services

From the beginning ROK only focused on premium sneaker cleaning and restoration services, but as the business evolved, it became clear that customers were looking for more complete care solutions. Many people found traditional dry cleaners outdated or inconvenient, and there was a clear opportunity to integrate this service.

In response, ROK launched a dry-cleaning service aimed not at eco-leadership, but at convenience, relevance, and integration. The idea was to provide a one-stop care service for sneakers and clothing which would be appealing to busy, style-conscious consumers who value practicality and consistency in their service providers. This expansion can also open the door to service bundling and loyalty strategies that go beyond one-off sneaker cleans.

Additionally, ROK is exploring the possibility of collaborating with barbershops and gyms as drop-off or pick-up points for sneakers. These partnerships represent a shift toward community-rooted, lifestyle-integrated business models where customers can manage multiple tasks in one place, and brands benefit from shared visibility and crossover value.

### **1.3 Personal Motivation and Research Framing**

Central to the research is the question:

**How can Revive Our Kicks leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and achieve profitability in South Dublin's competitive startup ecosystem?**

This research question comes from my direct experience running ROK over the past year. Since taking over the business from a friend, I've restructured, rebranded, and expanded it. Through this journey, I've observed firsthand how customer behaviour, retention, and service strategy affect the survival of small ventures. The decision to expand into dry cleaning and explore barbershop partnerships came directly from day-to-day feedback and operations.

To investigate these ideas, this research adopts an ethnographic approach, which combines personal business involvement with academic methods. I will conduct three semi-structured interviews to capture outside perspectives from:

- A sole trader, to understand small business strategy and challenges.
- A sneaker consumer and enthusiast, to explore brand loyalty and expectations.
- A barber or barbershop owner, to compare booking systems, customer experience, and partnership potential.

These participants offer relevant perspectives on how integrated service models work across industries.

## 1.4 Research Aim and Focus

This research explores how ROK can address these challenges by leveraging two main strategies: sustainability and integrated service models. The project draws on the real-world development of the business, along with planned interviews and academic theory, to evaluate what drives loyalty, growth, and brand credibility in this niche market.

By combining qualitative insight, industry literature, and lived business experience, this dissertation aims to offer actionable recommendations for small service brands in Ireland. It will explore how customer loyalty is earned, what role partnerships and convenience play in driving repeat engagement, and whether sustainable branding creates competitive advantage in real-world operations.

The following literature review outlines the academic and industry perspectives that inform this research and highlights gaps that this study aims to address.

### **How can Revive Our Kicks utilize sustainability and integrated service models to build a loyal customer base and achieve profitability within South Dublin's competitive startup ecosystem?**

To answer this briefly, the study employs an ethnographic approach—blending personal business experience with qualitative interviews and secondary data to gain in-depth insights into both consumer behaviour and the operational realities of niche service businesses.

This dissertation is structured into several different key sections. Following this introduction, Section 2.0 presents a review of relevant literature, examining key themes such as sneaker culture, sustainability in small business, customer retention strategies, the Irish SME landscape and the integration of multi-service

models. Section 3.0 focuses on small business success in Ireland, while Section 4.0 discusses multi-service integration models relevant to niche businesses like Revive Our Kicks. Section 5.0 outlines the research questions & objectives, clearly defining the focus of the study. Section 6.0 presents the research methodology, detailing the physical approach, research design, sampling strategy and ethical considerations. Section 7.0 provides an analysis of the primary data collected, identifying emerging themes linked to customer retention and service integration. Finally, Section 8.0 offers a critical evaluation of the findings in relation to the literature, outlining limitations and providing practical recommendations for Revive Our Kicks and potential future research.

## 2.0 Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature across sneaker culture, sustainability, customer retention, small business strategy, and integrated service models — all of which inform the research aim of improving ROK's retention and profitability.

The Sneaker care industry has experienced substantial development in recent years, influenced by changing consumer preferences and cultural and behavioural trends. The demand for professional sneaker care services has increased in urban markets, particularly due to the growing emphasis on sustainability and the emergence of sneaker culture. This review also considers the relevance of service integration and convenience-focused business models, particularly ROK's recent move into dry cleaning - as part of a wider strategy for enhancing loyalty and brand experience.

### 2.1 Key Authors and Studies

1. **Elizabeth Semmelhack** (*The Rise of Sneaker Culture*):

Investigates the transformation of sneakers into collectible fashion items, highlighting the cultural and economic factors driving demand for maintenance

services. Urban sneaker culture has transformed sneakers into symbols of identity and investment, generating opportunities for specialised care services.

Understanding sneaker culture helps explain why customers seek repeat services as its not just for function, but for care, collection, and social status. While Semmelhack (2020) sees sneaker culture as embedded and long-lasting, others suggest it may plateau or shift with fashion cycles, requiring businesses like ROK to diversify. (Semmelhack, 2020).

## **2. Grand View Research:**

Provides a macro-level analysis of the global sneaker market, identifying niche services like sneaker care as emerging growth sectors in urban areas. The report underscores the influence of quality and convenience on consumer decisions. (Grand View Research, 2023).

This reflects how urban consumers, particularly younger demographics, prioritise lifestyle alignment and quick access over generic services.

## **3. McKinsey & Company:**

Outlines customer loyalty strategies in the fashion sector, focusing on the role of personalised services, loyalty programs and digital engagement in fostering repeat business. Although, McKinsey also acknowledges that loyalty efforts often fail without strong service integration or emotional brand attachment which helped in highlighting a key issue for businesses like ROK. This aligns with ROK's goal of building a loyal customer base through integrated services and differentiated experiences. McKinsey further notes that digital loyalty must be

paired with convenience and clear value propositions, these are areas where ROK's bundled service model could deliver competitive advantage. (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

## **2.2 Perspectives On Industry Growth**

### **1. The Growing Trend of Sneaker Culture and Maintenance**

Sneaker culture has increased rapidly, with individuals dedicating their hard earned time and resources to sneaker collecting & maintenance. Sneakers are no longer solely functional but are regarded as financial and cultural assets, particularly by today's youth. Research highlights that preserving sneaker value has fuelled the demand for professional cleaning and restoration services. (Semmelhack, 2020). However, some warn that this trend may plateau as fashion evolves, posing risks to businesses heavily reliant on sneaker cleaning & maintenance.

### **2. Challenges in Capturing a Consistent Customer Base**

Consumer consistency remains an obstacle, as many individuals use professional sneaker care rarely and often favour less expensive DIY methods. Businesses can address this by establishing loyalty programs and offering personalised services to encourage frequent visits (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Creating true retention requires more than deals - it relies on a trusted, consistent and integrated experience. Subscription models, convenient add-ons, and community integration can help convert occasional users into loyal clients.

### 3. The Influence of Sustainable Practices on Consumer Choices

Environmentally conscious consumers increasingly prioritise sustainability, often paying a premium for eco-friendly services. However, critics express that price sensitivity and convenience remain huge factors for many customers, creating tension between eco-friendliness and affordability. For ROK, this suggests a possibility for a dual need: to continue eco-conscious practices where possible, but to also ensure they lead with convenience, service bundling, and digital engagement to appeal to broader audiences. (Grand View Research, 2023).

#### 2.3 Contrasting Viewpoints

##### 1. Sneaker Culture:

*Optimistic View:* Sneaker culture is perceived as a long-term trend offering opportunities for niche services like sneaker care.

*Sceptical View:* Others see sneaker culture as a brief trend, suggesting businesses should diversify to avoid over-reliance on a single service sector.

##### 2. Customer Engagement:

*Challenges:* DIY methods and occasional service requirements hinder loyalty.

*Opportunity:* Personalised services and loyalty programs, paired with digital engagement, can encourage repeat business (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

##### 3. Sustainability:

*Positive Impact:* Appeals to younger, eco-conscious consumers.

*Limitations:* Cost and convenience remain significant factors, potentially limiting the appeal of sustainability-driven models to specific demographics.

This suggests sustainability can support a brand identity but must be balanced with speed and ease of use.

## **2.4 Differences in Retention Strategies, Service Frequency & Market Segmentation.**

Customer retention is a central focus for service-based businesses like Revive Our Kicks (ROK). The literature identifies several strategies that small businesses can adopt to encourage repeat visits and long-term loyalty. One widely used method is the implementation of loyalty programs, which reward customers for frequent engagement and create incentives for them to return. These programs, commonly seen in both retail and service sectors, provide tangible value to the customer while creating an emotional connection to the brand (McKinsey & Company, 2022). Personalised services also play a significant role in enhancing customer retention. By tailoring the customer experience based on individual preferences, businesses can differentiate themselves and create memorable service interactions that encourage repeat business.

Another key strategy is the use of social media engagement, online platforms like Instagram have become powerful tools for businesses like ROK to showcase their services, share before-and-after transformations, and highlight customer reviews. Its also essential to maintain regular contact with customers and build brand community. This digital engagement not only promotes the business but also strengthens customer relationships and encourages referrals, which are critical for small, niche businesses operating on tight marketing budgets (LEOs, 2022).

Service frequency varies significantly among customer types, and understanding this is essential for effective business planning. Research indicates that regular users, such as sneaker collectors and enthusiasts are likely to seek cleaning and

restoration services on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In comparison, casual customers tend to engage only for special occasions or when their sneakers reach a visibly poor condition Manchanda, R. (2022). Businesses like ROK can address this by providing subscription models or prepaid cleaning packages, which would encourage more consistent service use and generate a predictable revenue stream.

Market segmentation is another crucial consideration when designing retention strategies. High-end customers typically prioritise premium, luxury service experiences, often expecting superior quality, fast turnaround, and personalised care. Eco-conscious consumers prioritise sustainable solutions and are often willing to pay a premium for services that align with their values. Finally, convenience-oriented customers prefer to focus primarily on fast service, flexible drop-off and collection options and not to forget bundled services that fit into their busy lifestyles. For ROK, understanding these segments allows for tailored marketing and multiple services that meet diverse customer needs while supporting overall business growth.

In summary, the literature highlights that successful customer retention strategies require a mix of personalised engagement, service consistency, and thoughtful segmentation. For small businesses like Revive Our Kicks, it's essential to begin leveraging these strategies from the beginning, alongside service integration and sustainability can help build stronger customer relationships and improve profitability in a competitive market.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

The sneaker care industry is growing in response to evolving consumer preferences, sustainability trends and cultural movements. While the literature provides valuable insights into sneaker culture and urban consumer behaviour, research on small business strategies for customer retention and eco-friendly practices remains limited. These gaps present opportunities for Revive Our Kicks

to innovate and differentiate within South Dublin's market. Further exploration of niche services and sustainability-driven models can enhance customer loyalty and profitability.

More specifically, the literature suggests that integrating bundle services such as dry cleaning and barbershop collaborations, can meet rising demand for lifestyle convenience and enhance retention. This strategy could be very effective for small businesses in Ireland, operating within its competitive & cost sensitive start up system.

### 3.0 Sub-Section 2: Small Business Success in Ireland

Small businesses are a cornerstone of Ireland's economy, contributing significantly to both employment and GDP. The Irish government actively promotes entrepreneurship through grants, training programmes, and tax incentives, creating a supportive environment for small business growth (OECD , 2019). However, challenges such as market competition, resource constraints, and limited access to funding continue to exist. This section examines the key factors influencing small business success, with a specific focus on government support systems and their impact on businesses like Revive Our Kicks (ROK).

### 3.1 Key Authors and Studies

Small businesses in Ireland play a crucial role to the economy, contributing significantly to employment and GDP. **The Irish Small and Medium Enterprise Association (ISME)** has highlighted the economic value generated by SMEs, noting that they represent over 99% of active enterprises in Ireland and employ a substantial portion of the workforce (ISME, 2023). ISME's research draws attention to several core challenges facing SMEs, including labour shortages, rising operational costs, and increased competition. These external pressures can directly impact small businesses' ability to sustain profitability and retain customers over the long term.

**Enterprise Ireland** has also provided valuable insights into the support structures available to Irish SMEs. Their research focuses on the range of government-backed programs designed to assist small businesses and startups, including financial grants, export support schemes, and mentorship initiatives (Enterprise Ireland, 2023). These supports aim to reduce barriers to entry, stimulate innovation, and help businesses like Revive Our Kicks invest in marketing, customer retention programs, or sustainable practices.

Further contributions from **Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)** provide a more localised view of small business support. LEOs play a critical role in delivering grant funding, training workshops, and business networking opportunities at the community level (LEOs, 2022). Their research highlights the importance of targeted support for startups operating in niche sectors. LEOs can offer tailored advice and funding opportunities for projects like service integration or sustainability-driven business models for businesses like ROK.

Together, these studies present a comprehensive view of the small business landscape in Ireland, addressing both the challenges SMEs face and the resources available to support their growth and customer retention efforts.

### **3.2 Synthesis of Perspectives**

A review of the literature surrounding small business success in Ireland reveals a mixture of supportive and critical perspectives regarding government initiatives and entrepreneurial challenges.

From a supportive viewpoint, sources such as ISME and Enterprise Ireland argue that government-backed programs, including financial grants and mentorship schemes, play a critical role in reducing barriers to entry for small businesses. These supports provide essential funding and guidance, especially for startups looking to innovate, improve customer retention, or adopt sustainable practices.

Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) also reinforce this positive perspective, highlighting their role in delivering targeted training, funding, and business development services at the local level.

However, there are also critical viewpoints that raise concerns about the accessibility and overall effectiveness of these support systems. Some small businesses report difficulties in applying for grants, with time-consuming processes and complex eligibility criteria. There is also criticism around the geographic distribution of support, with suggestions that businesses operating in more urban areas may have an advantage over those in rural locations when it comes to receiving funding or mentorship.

When examining entrepreneurial challenges, the literature consistently points to high operational costs, market competition, and resource constraints as major obstacles for Irish SMEs. This is particularly relevant to service-based businesses like Revive Our Kicks, which operate in a highly competitive urban market with limited resources. Startups are often required to be highly adaptable and innovative in order to survive and grow. Many successful small businesses have leveraged digital marketing tools and personalised customer engagement strategies to maintain customer loyalty and stand out in crowded marketplaces.

From a marketing point of view, both traditional and digital methods remain important for small business success. Word-of-mouth and local community engagement are essential, especially for businesses with a strong local customer base. However, the growing influence of social media platforms like Instagram offers small businesses a low-cost and highly effective channel for engaging with customers and showcasing their services. This is particularly relevant for ROK, given the visual nature of sneaker cleaning and restoration work.

Overall, the synthesis of these perspectives suggests that while government support structures offer valuable opportunities for Irish SMEs, their impact is sometimes limited by administrative barriers and competition for resources.

Entrepreneurial adaptability, innovative marketing, and strong customer relationship management continue to play a more direct role in securing long-term business success.

### **3.3 Research Gaps**

Although existing literature offers a strong overview of small business challenges and government support systems in Ireland, several key gaps remain that this study aims to address.

Firstly, there is a noticeable lack of research focused on niche service industries such as sneaker & dry cleaning within the Irish SME context. Most studies to date concentrate on traditional sectors like retail, hospitality, or manufacturing, leaving a clear gap in understanding how small, specialist service businesses operate and succeed in urban markets like South Dublin.

Secondly, there is limited exploration of how sustainability initiatives influence on small business growth and customer retention in Ireland's service sector. While global studies highlight the rising importance of eco-friendly business models, few Irish-based studies examine how small, customer-facing businesses implement sustainability as part of their operational strategy or how customers perceive and respond to these efforts.

Another gap lies in the area of service integration. There is very little research examining how small businesses can successfully combine services such as sneaker cleaning drop off locations within a barbershop or alongside dry cleaning services, to enhance customer convenience and increase repeat business. While multi-service models are discussed in international literature, their application within the Irish SME environment remains largely unexplored.

Finally, majority of the existing Irish SME research focuses on large-scale government initiatives or high-growth startups, with less attention given to small, sole-trader businesses or micro-enterprises. Given that Revive Our Kicks

operates within this micro-business space, this study seeks to add valuable insights into how such businesses can navigate customer retention challenges through innovation, service integration, and sustainability-focused strategies.

By addressing these gaps, this dissertation aims to provide a greater understanding of small business success strategies within niche Irish service industries, with direct relevance to both academic research and practical business development.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Small business success in Ireland is influenced by a mix of government support, entrepreneurial adaptability, and effective marketing. Although grants and mentorship programmes provide an important foundation, small enterprises must also innovate and differentiate to remain competitive. For Revive Our Kicks, leveraging government resources where available, adopting cost-effective digital marketing strategies, and integrating convenient, multi-service models can support long-term business growth.

This section highlights that while policy support helps, true resilience comes from creativity, community integration, and evolving to meet consumer expectations. ROK's approach is rooted in customer experience, visual branding, and service innovation which reflects these priorities.

### **4.0 Sub-Section 3: Integration of Multi-Services**

Service integration is an emerging trend in niche industries for small businesses. Businesses can enhance customer convenience and diversify revenue streams by combining services, such as sneaker cleaning drop-off locations in barbershops. These models not only attract new customers but also encourage repeat visits through convenience-driven bundling.

This section critically evaluates the potential for growth and challenges associated with these strategies, with a focus on Revive Our Kicks (ROK).

## 4.1 Key Authors and Studies

The concept of multi-service integration has gained increased attention in business literature as small businesses seek to diversify their services and increase customer convenience. The Harvard Business Review (2023) explores the rise of multi-service businesses, highlighting how combining services under one roof can enhance customer loyalty and improve revenue streams. Case studies discussed include examples such as coworking spaces offering café services or gyms incorporating health food outlets. These examples demonstrate how small businesses can meet multiple customer needs in a single visit, enhancing the overall customer experience and encouraging repeat business.

The Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) have also contributed research on the challenges associated with diversified service models. According to LEO studies (2022), small businesses adopting multi-service approaches often face operational difficulties, particularly in terms of resource allocation and service management. LEOs highlight the need for careful planning to ensure that adding new services does not dilute the quality of existing services. For businesses like Revive Our Kicks, this is a critical consideration when exploring collaborations with barbershops or introducing new services like dry cleaning.

McKinsey & Company (2022) provide additional insight by discussing how green business strategies and sustainability can complement multi-service integration. Their research shows that integrating eco-conscious practices alongside diversified services can enhance a business's reputation and customer loyalty, especially among younger, sustainability-focused consumers.

Collectively, these studies provide a valuable foundation for understanding both the opportunities and operational risks involved in adopting a multi-service model. For Revive Our Kicks, this literature highlights both the potential benefits of service integration and the importance of maintaining service quality and operational efficiency.

## 4.2 Synthesis of Perspectives

The literature on multi-service integration presents a mix of supportive and cautious viewpoints regarding its potential impact on customer retention and business growth for small service providers like Revive Our Kicks.

On the supportive side, studies such as those by the Harvard Business Review (2023) argue that service integration enhances customer convenience and increases cross-selling opportunities. By offering bundle services under one business model, small enterprises can capture more customer spend per visit while also building stronger customer relationships. For example, the integration of sneaker cleaning services within a barbershop setting allows customers to complete multiple tasks during a single appointment, which is particularly appealing to time-conscious consumers. This kind of value-adding experience is seen as an effective way to encourage repeat business and foster brand loyalty.

However, caution is advised in the literature when it comes to operational challenges associated with multi-service models. Research from the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs, 2022) highlights risks such as diluted brand identity, service quality decline, and increased operational complexity. Small businesses with limited staff and resources may struggle to maintain high standards across multiple services if integration is not carefully managed. Poor planning and overstressing resources can lead to customer dissatisfaction and, ultimately, damage to the business's reputation.

McKinsey & Company (2022) also provide insight into how sustainability can align with multi-service integration. Their findings suggest that customers are more likely to remain loyal to businesses that not only offer convenience but also demonstrate responsible and ethical business practices. For Revive Our Kicks, this means that integrating services like dry cleaning and barbershop collaborations could appeal to both convenience-oriented and eco-conscious customers if managed effectively.

Overall, the synthesis of perspectives indicates that while multi-service integration offers real potential for improving customer retention and profitability, it requires strategic planning and strong operational management. The key for businesses like ROK is to balance service expansion with quality control, ensuring that new services enhance, rather than compromise the customer experience.

### **4.3 Conclusion**

Service integration provides meaningful opportunities for growth in niche industries like sneaker care. For Revive Our Kicks, providing new services such as barbershop collaborations can enhance customer convenience and loyalty. The addition of modern dry cleaning services also supports this vision by giving customers an all-in-one solution for sneaker and dry cleaning care.

However, service integration requires precise planning to maintain quality and operational efficiency. By addressing these challenges through innovative approaches, such as leveraging digital marketing, creating smart subscription packages, or piloting drop-off partnerships ROK can position itself as a leader in South Dublin's sneaker care and lifestyle service market.

## 5.0 Research Question & Objectives

This study aims to investigate how Revive Our Kicks (ROK), a small sneaker and dry cleaning business in South Dublin, can improve customer retention and long-term profitability by adopting sustainability practices and integrated service models. Building on themes identified in the literature review including sneaker culture, SME challenges, and consumer demand for convenience the research will explore both strategic opportunities and operational constraints relevant to niche service providers. The guiding questions and objectives below will shape the design, focus, and thematic direction of the study.

### Main Research Question

How can Revive Our Kicks leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and achieve profitability in South Dublin's competitive startup ecosystem?

### Sub-Questions

- What operational challenges and opportunities exist for small niche businesses in the sneaker care industry?
- How do eco-friendly practices influence consumer behaviour and loyalty in this market?
- In what ways can the integration of services (e.g., sneaker cleaning with barbershop collaborations) contribute to customer satisfaction and retention?
- How can digital marketing strategies be optimised to support these initiatives?

## Research Objectives

- To explore the relationship between sustainability practices and customer retention in the sneaker care industry.
- To investigate the potential of service integration in enhancing operational efficiency and customer loyalty.
- To identify best practices in digital marketing that can be adapted by niche businesses like ROK.
- To provide actionable recommendations for overcoming the challenges faced by small businesses in a competitive startup environment.

## 6.0 Methodology

This research project adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach situated within an interpretivist philosophical framework. Given the nature of the research aim:

**Exploring how Revive Our Kicks (ROK) can leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and profitability within the Irish startup environment**

This methodology allows for a deep understanding of the subjective experiences of both business owners and customers within this niche service industry.

The interpretivist paradigm is centred on the belief that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the perspectives and experiences of individuals. Unlike positivist research, which focuses on measurable variables and quantitative data, interpretivism places emphasis on meaning, context, and human interpretation. This philosophical stance is particularly suited to this study, as the research explores customer behaviours, loyalty drivers, and small business operational strategies, factors that are inherently subjective and context-dependent.

An ethnographic design further complements this philosophical approach. As the researcher is directly involved in the day-to-day operations of ROK, first-hand observations of customer behaviour, service delivery processes, and internal business decisions provide valuable contextual insight. This insider perspective supports a more authentic understanding of how customer retention strategies function in practice within the business.

To gather additional perspectives beyond the researcher's own observations, primary data collection will involve three semi-structured interviews with carefully selected participants. These include a sole trader, a barbershop owner, and a sneaker enthusiast/customer. Each interview is designed to explore themes relevant to the research, such as sustainability, service integration, customer satisfaction, and loyalty-building tactics.

By adopting this interpretivist and ethnographic methodology, the research aims to generate rich, qualitative data that captures the complexity of customer-business relationships within the small service sector. The findings will help inform practical strategies for ROK while contributing to a broader understanding of retention and growth challenges faced by Irish SMEs.

## **6.1 Research Design: Ethnographic and Qualitative**

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic research design, which aligns closely with the interpretivist philosophy underpinning the project. The goal is to explore the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals who engage with, or operate within, service-based businesses similar to Revive Our Kicks (ROK). Given the focus on customer retention, service integration, and sustainability, a qualitative approach is essential for generating detailed insights that quantitative methods would not fully capture.

An ethnographic approach is particularly appropriate for this research as the researcher holds an insider role within ROK. This allows for first-hand

observation of business operations, customer interactions, and internal decision-making processes. This positionality offers rich context and helps ground the research findings in real-world business practice.

Primary data collection will be conducted through three semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen due to its flexibility, allowing the researcher to explore key topics while giving participants the freedom to elaborate on their experiences. Each interview will last approximately 15 to 25 minutes and will be conducted either in person or via video call, depending on participant availability and preference. Participants will include a sole trader, a barbershop owner, and a sneaker enthusiast/customer. This selection ensures a mix of business and customer perspectives relevant to the research aim.

The interview questions will be guided by several core themes emerging from the literature review. These include customer loyalty, satisfaction, service integration, sustainability, and the influence of convenience on repeat business. For example, the sole trader interview will focus on long-term customer relationship management and retention strategies. The barbershop owner will provide insights into client-based service models and the operational realities of running a small, service-oriented business in Ireland. Finally, the sneaker enthusiast will offer a consumer's perspective on service expectations, loyalty triggers, and views on integrated service options such as barbershop collaborations or dry cleaning add-ons.

Anticipated answers are expected to vary based on each participant's background. The sole trader may highlight word-of-mouth and relationship-based loyalty, whereas the barbershop owner might emphasise booking systems, convenience, and customer experience strategies. The sneaker enthusiast is likely to discuss factors influencing repeat service use, such as quality, price, speed, and potentially, sustainability.

Overall, this research design allows for the collection of rich, context-specific data that addresses the research objectives and fills the identified gaps in the existing literature on small business customer retention and service integration in the Irish SME sector.

## 6.2 Sampling Strategy

This study adopts a purposive sampling strategy, selecting participants based on their direct relevance to the research objectives. Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research where the goal is not to generalise findings to the wider population, but rather to gain rich, detailed insights from individuals with specific knowledge or experience (Bryman, 2016).

Three participants were chosen for this study: a sole trader, a barbershop owner, and a sneaker enthusiast/customer. Each participant represents a distinct perspective that is crucial for exploring the core themes of customer retention, service integration, and sustainability within small Irish service businesses.

The sole trader was selected to provide a business-owner perspective, particularly focusing on long-term customer relationship management, loyalty-building strategies, and the challenges of operating as an independent service provider in Ireland's competitive SME landscape. With decades of experience, this participant can offer valuable insight into customer retention tactics that rely on reputation, word-of-mouth, and personalised service—key elements identified in the literature.

The barbershop owner was chosen due to the close similarities between barbershop operations and Revive Our Kicks in terms of customer booking systems, client-based service delivery, and community-based marketing. Additionally, the barbershop industry often uses loyalty incentives and local collaborations, making this participant ideal for exploring the feasibility of service integration and customer engagement strategies.

Finally, the sneaker enthusiast was selected to represent the consumer perspective, providing insights into customer expectations, loyalty drivers, and purchasing behaviour within the sneaker care and restoration market. This participant will offer a first-hand view of what influences a customer's decision to return to a service, including factors such as convenience, service quality, pricing, and sustainability values.

Together, these three participants create a balanced sample, offering diverse yet complementary perspectives on the key themes of this research. Their input will help generate a well-rounded analysis of customer retention strategies and service integration opportunities for small Irish businesses like Revive Our Kicks.

### 6.3 Ethical Considerations

This research complies fully with the ethical guidelines set by the National College of Ireland (NCI). Ethical approval for the study was granted following the submission of the required ethics forms in both Semester 1 and Semester 2.

All participants will be provided with an **Information Sheet** explaining the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and details on how their data will be used. Prior to each interview, participants will also sign a **Participant Consent Form** confirming their voluntary agreement to take part. They will be informed that their participation is entirely voluntary, that they may withdraw at any time, and that they can choose not to answer any specific question if they prefer.

Data confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Interviews will be audio-recorded using a secure mobile device, and the audio files will be transferred to a password-protected computer and stored on an external USB device, as per NCI data retention policies. All interview data will be anonymised, and participants will be referred to using generic titles (e.g., Participant A, Participant B) within the dissertation to protect their identity.

In line with GDPR and NCI guidelines, all raw data will be securely stored for five years and then permanently deleted. Only the researcher (Aaron Keddy) will have access to the raw data. No sensitive or identifiable information will appear in the final dissertation.

## **6.4 Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis will be used to interpret the qualitative data collected from the three semi-structured interviews. This method is widely recognised for its suitability in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Given the interpretivist and ethnographic nature of this research, thematic analysis allows for a flexible yet rigorous approach to making sense of participants' subjective experiences.

The analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, which includes: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. After each interview, the recordings will be transcribed manually to ensure a deep familiarity with the content. This process will also help identify key phrases and points of emphasis from each participant.

Initial coding will involve highlighting significant words, phrases, or ideas that align with the research objectives. These codes will then be grouped into broader themes that reflect patterns across the interviews. It is anticipated that themes will relate to key areas such as customer loyalty drivers, the impact of convenience and service integration, perceptions of sustainability, and challenges faced by small business owners in retaining customers.

Given the small sample size, the analysis will focus on depth rather than breadth, allowing for a detailed exploration of each participant's views. Direct quotations from the interviews will be used where appropriate to illustrate key themes and support the interpretation of findings. This thematic approach will ensure that the

analysis remains grounded in the data while linking closely to the literature reviewed in earlier sections.

## **6.5 Limitations**

As with any small-scale qualitative research, this study has some limitations. The sample size is restricted to three participants, meaning the findings cannot be generalised to all Irish SMEs or service-based businesses. However, as this is an exploratory study, the focus is on gaining rich, detailed insights rather than achieving broad statistical representation.

Another limitation is the researcher's insider role within Revive Our Kicks. While this provides valuable context and understanding of the business environment, it could introduce some bias during data collection and interpretation. Efforts will be made to minimise this by maintaining objectivity, following ethical guidelines, and presenting participant views as accurately as possible.

Finally, as the study relies solely on interview data, there is no additional observational or quantitative data to cross-check findings. Future research could address this by incorporating customer surveys or performance metrics to build a more comprehensive analysis.

## **7.0 Analysis & Findings**

This section provides a full thematic analysis of the main research that came from three semi-structured interviews with individuals who had unique but very relevant points of view for this study: a sole trader in the flooring business, a barbershop owner and a sneaker enthusiast who is the main target customer for Revive Our Kicks (ROK). These participants were purposefully selected to

provide grounded, practical insights into customer loyalty, operational methods, and evolving consumer expectations in the context of small, service-focused businesses in Ireland.

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach, which enabled the identification of meaningful themes and patterns within the data. An inductive strategy was applied, which allowed for themes to naturally develop during the interviews rather than being set prior.

This study identified four main themes:

1. Customer Loyalty and Relationship Building
2. The Role of Digital Booking Systems and Convenience
3. Service Integration and Partnerships
4. Sustainability and Consumer Priorities

Each of these themes is discussed in detail below, supported by direct quotes from participants to highlight their experiences and the relevance of their views to ROK's business objectives.

## **7.1 Customer Loyalty and Relationship Building**

Customer loyalty emerged as a recurring theme throughout all interviews. Despite differing backgrounds and industries, each participant stressed the value of trust, quality service, and personal connection in driving customer retention. The sole trader, who has over thirty years of experience, emphasised the importance of hard work and personal dedication:

“If it's your own business, it's up to you to make sure it works... People that work nine to five go home and that's it. I don't work 9 to 5. I'm always working.”

He attributed his long-term customer relationships to consistent service quality and a strong local reputation:

“For every hundred happy customers, you're going to end up with 200 customers because they're going to tell their mates.”

For him, word-of-mouth referrals remain more effective than any form of traditional advertising. The barbershop owner also recognised the role of relationship-building in his business. He described how customer experience extends beyond the technical service:

“I'd say 40% of it is the haircut, but 60% of it is the vibe and the connection you have with your clients.”

He prioritised remembering client names, maintaining an upbeat environment, and engaging in friendly conversation as key drivers of repeat business.

From the consumer's perspective, the sneaker enthusiast echoed similar sentiments, emphasising the importance of ease and familiarity:

“Honestly, it's not just about the cleaning. I'd come back because I know the service is good, and it's easy. Plus, it's local, which makes a difference.”

Together, these views suggest that in small, community-based businesses like ROK, loyalty stems primarily from personal relationships, consistent quality, and trust, rather than pricing or advertising alone. These findings are reinforced by academic research. Semmelhack (2020) identifies community ties as central to customer loyalty in niche sectors, while McKinsey & Company (2022) highlights that emotional engagement and tailored services are key to long-term

retention. Reichheld and Scheffer (2000) also stress that loyalty grows through consistent, high-quality interactions that reduce customer churn. Furthermore, Sage Business Cloud (2023) reports that 68% of Irish consumers favour local businesses due to personal trust and relationships, directly supporting these findings and their applicability to ROK.

### **Reflections for Revive Our Kicks:**

Reflecting on this theme, it is clear that customer loyalty in small, service-based businesses like Revive Our Kicks is more complex than just offering promotions or discounts. The findings highlight that the emotional connection between a business and its customers is what truly fosters long-term retention. For me, this reinforces the need to continually invest in personalisation, whether that means remembering returning clients, rewarding repeat customers, or simply offering consistently positive interactions. To earn loyalty over and over it's essential to be trustworthy, provide an excellent service, and being accessible for clients to talk to. These ideas also make me want to formalise these personal connections without losing the "local business" feel. A loyalty card system for customers and an automated customer details database for regular customers could help build loyalty while keeping that personal touch.

## **7.2 The Role of Digital Booking Systems and Convenience**

Digital convenience emerged as another significant theme, particularly in light of post-pandemic shifts in customer behaviour. Both the barbershop owner and sneaker enthusiast expressed a preference for structured online booking systems. The barber described how online bookings became essential following COVID-19:

“After COVID, everything changed. Now, around 90% of bookings are online. Walk-ins are rare because people want a set time.”

He highlighted that tools like GetBarber and BareSpace have simplified his scheduling processes:

“It’s just easier for everyone. Clients are in and out quicker, and there’s no waiting around.”

Likewise, the sneaker enthusiast favoured booking systems that offer ease and professionalism:

“Booking systems seem more official than just messaging on Instagram or WhatsApp. It feels more professional.”

These observations align with Bressler’s (2020) findings, which indicate that microbusinesses using digital scheduling tools experience improved customer satisfaction and retention. In addition, the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME) reported in 2022 that Irish SMEs adopting digital tools like booking apps see an average 27% increase in retention.

Currently, ROK relies on informal booking methods via social media. However, this research shows a clear customer expectation for more structured systems, suggesting that adopting an online booking platform would improve both customer experience and operational efficiency.

### **Reflections for Revive Our Kicks:**

This theme makes it clear that a structured digital booking system is now a baseline expectation rather than an optional extra. While I’ve previously relied on informal methods, I now see that integrating a professional booking

tool would not only benefit customers but also improve my business operations by reducing admin time. Additionally, digital tools could help me gather customer data to better understand peak periods, common service preferences, and client behaviours over time. This could inform smarter marketing campaigns or seasonal promotions. Going forward, I aim to prioritise implementing a system that not only allows online bookings but also offers features like loyalty tracking or automatic follow-ups to encourage repeat business.

### **7.3 Service Integration and Partnerships**

The potential for service integration, such as providing sneaker cleaning drop-off points within other local businesses, received mixed reactions from participants. The barbershop owner expressed concerns about such partnerships:

“It’s not really my thing. I wouldn’t want another business inside my barbershop—it could affect the vibe.”

He was concerned about disrupting his carefully cultivated shop atmosphere:

“It’s hard to mix two things unless they’re really related. Otherwise, it could confuse customers or change the feel of the place.”

However, the sneaker enthusiast responded positively to the concept, provided the partnership involved trusted businesses:

“If it’s at a barbershop or gym I already go to, yeah, I’d definitely use it—as long as my sneakers are safe.”

This highlights how customer trust and convenience are key factors in the

success of such partnerships. According to Harvard Business Review (2023), multi-service models can work well in urban environments where convenience is valued, but they must be aligned with brand identity to avoid operational issues.

Similarly, Enterprise Ireland (2023) advises SMEs to ensure any partnerships are based on shared customer demographics and complementary services.

### **Reflections for Revive Our Kicks:**

This theme helped clarify the realistic pros and cons of working with other businesses or combining services. I now understand that collaborations can potentially help my brand get more visibility and make things easier, but they need to be handled delicately so that they don't hurt the brand's identity. Based on this feedback, I would only consider collaborations with businesses that strongly align with my target audience and values. A phased approach—such as short-term collaborations or limited-time pop-up events—may be a safer way to trial partnerships without committing long-term. Furthermore, I can explore collaborations beyond physical locations, such as cross-promotions with other businesses via social media, which could offer similar benefits with less risk.

## **7.4 Sustainability and Consumer Priorities**

Sustainability emerged as a less prominent theme in these interviews, with participants showing limited concern for eco-friendly services. The sneaker enthusiast admitted it was not a major factor in his decision-making:

“Honestly, it wouldn't really bother me much. If it's eco-friendly, that's cool, but I care more about price and quick service.”

The sole trader shared a similar outlook, focusing on practicality and durability:

“It’s not just about being green. If something lasts longer, it’s worth it.”

The findings indicate that price, speed, and quality are still the factors that matter most for clients in this industry, with sustainability being an extra benefit rather than a key selling point.

According to McKinsey & Company (2022), sustainability is essential to some customers, but it doesn’t often affect their buying decisions in service-based businesses. Deloitte Ireland (2023) supports this, finding that although many Irish consumers express interest in eco-friendly options, few prioritise them when making actual purchasing decisions.

### **Reflections for Revive Our Kicks:**

The findings around sustainability surprised me to some extent. While I value sustainable practices, it is evident that most of my customers currently prioritise price, speed, and convenience above environmental considerations.

However, I believe that ROK still has an opportunity to gradually include sustainability. For example, I could state that my cleaning methods don’t utilise harsh chemicals or that I use biodegradable packaging. This would make sustainability seem like a "bonus" instead than the main priority. This would make more environmentally responsible clients happy without turning off those who are more concerned with price and ease of use. Long-term, I will continue monitoring changing attitudes around sustainability, as it may become a more dominant factor among younger consumers in future years.

### **Comparative Reflection Across Themes**

An important insight from this research is the contrast between the three interviewees’ perspectives. The sole trader represents a traditional business

model focused on long-term relationships and word-of-mouth referrals. The barbershop owner reflects a more modern, tech-savvy approach shaped by digital tools and social media engagement. Meanwhile, the sneaker enthusiast prioritises convenience, fast service, and flexible digital interactions. This diversity illustrates the need for ROK to balance traditional, high-touch customer service with modern digital convenience. By recognising these differences, I can tailor my services to meet the expectations of a broad customer base.

## 7.5 Summary of the results

The results of this analysis give clear answers to the main research question: how can Revive Our Kicks leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and profitability?

### **Four main conclusions emerged:**

1. Customer loyalty is driven by strong personal connections, consistent service, and trust.
2. Digital booking systems are now a customer expectation, offering convenience and professionalism.
3. Service partnerships present opportunities but require careful alignment with brand identity and customer trust.
4. Sustainability is a secondary concern but can still offer added value when integrated subtly.

### **Closing Reflection**

In general, these findings have been extremely helpful for Revive Our Kicks. They demonstrate that for a business to be successful in the long run, it needs to find a balance between traditional business and modern digital services. They also state that sustainability and partnerships aren't the primary reasons why consumers purchase from them, but they may be very beneficial if done the right

way. In the next chapter, these issues will be critically addressed, along with useful suggestions for ROK's future approach.

## **8.0 Discussion & Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore how Revive Our Kicks can leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and profitability within Ireland's competitive startup landscape. The analysis identified four central themes: customer loyalty and relationship building, digital booking systems and convenience, service integration and partnerships, and sustainability and consumer priorities. This section critically examines how these findings align with existing literature and broader market trends.

The first major finding, the importance of customer loyalty and personal relationships. This strongly aligns with existing studies. Semmelhack (2020) emphasised that niche services thrive on cultural connection and community engagement. Similarly, McKinsey & Company (2022) argue that emotional loyalty, built through personalisation and consistent service, plays a key role in customer retention. The sole trader's focus on trust and long-term reputation mirrors these insights, as does the barbershop owner's emphasis on atmosphere and personal connection. These findings reassure that, for service businesses like ROK, customer loyalty must remain rooted in interpersonal relationships rather than price-based competition alone.

The second theme, centred on digital convenience, reflects a growing body of research highlighting the importance of digitalisation for small enterprises. Bressler (2020) demonstrated that digital booking systems significantly improve customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, while ISME (2022) found that Irish SMEs implementing such tools often experience increased retention. Both the barbershop owner and sneaker enthusiast expressed a strong preference for online booking systems, indicating that these tools have become an expectation

among modern customers. This highlights a key opportunity for ROK to professionalise its operations by adopting a structured digital booking platform.

The third theme revealed mixed perspectives on service integration. While the barbershop owner expressed concerns about brand dilution, the sneaker enthusiast valued the convenience of integrated services, provided there is sufficient trust. Harvard Business Review (2023) suggests that service bundling can succeed in urban environments where customers value efficiency. Enterprise Ireland (2023) recommends carefully aligned collaborations for SMEs. ROK's potential partnerships, therefore, must balance customer convenience with the need to maintain a clear brand identity.

Finally, the findings on sustainability revealed that most customers still prioritise price, convenience, and speed over environmental considerations. Deloitte Ireland (2023) reports that although Irish consumers express growing interest in eco-friendly services, their purchasing decisions remain driven by practical factors. This suggests that ROK should integrate sustainability subtly rather than as a core marketing message, offering eco-friendly options as an additional feature for those who value them.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that Revive Our Kicks must strike a balance between traditional relationship-based service and modern digital convenience, while cautiously exploring partnerships and subtly embedding sustainability.

## **8.1 Recommendations for Revive Our Kicks**

Based on the findings of this research, several actionable recommendations can be made for the future development of Revive Our Kicks. These recommendations are designed to enhance customer loyalty, streamline business operations, and support future growth, all while remaining aligned with customer expectations and market trends.

Firstly, ROK should continue to prioritise personalisation and relationship-building as a core business strategy. The interviews clearly showed that customer loyalty is built not only on service quality but also on interpersonal connections and familiarity. ROK should formalise its approach to customer relationship management by creating a simple customer database. This could track service histories, preferences, and visit frequency, allowing for personalised marketing and loyalty rewards. Even small gestures, such as offering discounts after a certain number of visits or sending reminder messages, could deepen customer loyalty while maintaining the personal, local feel of the business.

Secondly, adopting a structured digital booking system is strongly recommended. The findings indicate that digital booking tools are now a standard expectation for service-based businesses. Platforms like Fresha, GetBarber, or BareSpace could suit ROK's needs by offering appointment scheduling, payment processing, and customer management in one place. Additionally, digital bookings could help automate appointment reminders, gather valuable data on customer behaviour & details, and free up time for other business activities. These tools would also enhance ROK's professional image, making it easier to attract new customers.

Thirdly, ROK should explore small-scale service integration experiments with trusted local businesses, such as barbershops, gyms, or cafés, to assess the viability of drop-off points for sneaker cleaning. Starting with short-term trials or pop-up collaborations would allow ROK to test customer interest without long-term commitments. This approach would also provide flexibility to adjust based on customer feedback and operational logistics. Any partnerships pursued should align with ROK's brand image and target demographic to avoid diluting its identity.

Finally, while sustainability may not be a top priority for most customers, ROK should still incorporate eco-friendly practices as a secondary value. Small changes, such as using biodegradable cleaning products or offering a "green clean" option at no extra cost, could appeal to environmentally conscious

customers without alienating others. ROK can also share these efforts subtly through social media or its website to enhance its brand reputation over time.

By implementing these recommendations, Revive Our Kicks can strengthen its market position, improve operational efficiency, and build long-term customer relationships, all while maintaining its distinctive community-driven ethos.

## **8.2 Research Limitations and Future Research**

While this study has provided valuable insights into customer behaviour and business strategies for Revive Our Kicks, several limitations should be acknowledged, along with opportunities for future research.

One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size. The primary data was collected through only three semi-structured interviews: one sole trader, one barbershop owner, and one sneaker enthusiast. While these participants were selected for their relevance to the research aims, their perspectives may not fully represent the broader customer base or business community in Ireland. Future studies should consider a larger and more diverse sample, potentially including customers from different regions or service sectors, to enhance the generalisability of the findings.

Additionally, the interviews were conducted in a relatively informal manner, and the discussions were limited by time constraints. This may have restricted the depth of insights gained, particularly regarding more complex topics such as sustainability or digital transformation. Longer or follow-up interviews could provide richer data and allow for deeper exploration of these themes.

Another limitation concerns the subjective nature of thematic analysis. While efforts were made to follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach rigorously, the interpretation of themes inevitably involves researcher bias.

Future research could incorporate other qualitative methods, such as focus groups or participant observations, to triangulate findings and improve validity.

This study focused primarily on small, service-based businesses operating within a localised Irish context. The results may not fully apply to larger enterprises or international markets. Comparative research between urban and rural businesses, or between industries with varying levels of digital adoption, could provide additional insights.

In terms of future research opportunities, it would be valuable to explore the long-term effects of digitalisation on customer loyalty and business performance in niche markets like sneaker cleaning. Studies investigating the effectiveness of digital marketing tools, such as social media campaigns or email newsletters, in driving customer retention would also be beneficial.

Lastly, given the emerging interest in sustainability these days, future research could examine how potentially changing consumer attitudes towards environmental responsibility may influence demand for eco-friendly services. This could help businesses like ROK stay ahead of evolving market expectations and regulatory developments

### **8.3 Conclusion**

This dissertation set out to investigate how Revive Our Kicks, a local sneaker cleaning business, can leverage sustainability and integrated service models to enhance customer retention and profitability. Through a combination of literature review, qualitative interviews, and thematic analysis, several key findings have emerged that hold significant implications for both ROK and similar service-based businesses in Ireland.

The study found that customer loyalty remains firmly rooted in personal relationships, consistent service quality, and trust. This highlights the need for small businesses like ROK to maintain a strong focus on personalised customer

interactions and relationship management. Digital booking systems also emerged as a critical factor in customer satisfaction and operational efficiency, demonstrating that digitalisation is no longer optional but essential for service-based businesses seeking to remain competitive.

Service integration presents both opportunities and risks. While some customers value the convenience of bundled services, business owners must carefully evaluate partnerships to ensure they align with their brand identity and do not compromise customer experience. Starting with small-scale collaborations may allow businesses to test new models without significant risk.

Sustainability, although it's not currently a top purchasing driver for most customers, is still gaining relevance as a secondary consideration. Businesses that subtly integrate eco-friendly practices can enhance their brand appeal and future-proof their operations without alienating price or convenience focused consumers.

In conclusion, this dissertation has shown that the path to long-term success for Revive Our Kicks lies in balancing traditional, relationship-based business practices with modern digital conveniences and operational efficiencies. By continuing to focus on personalisation, embracing digital tools, carefully considering partnerships, and gradually incorporating sustainability, ROK can strengthen its customer base, improve profitability, and secure its position within Ireland's competitive startup ecosystem.

These findings offer practical, actionable insights not only for ROK but also for other small businesses seeking to navigate similar challenges in a rapidly evolving market environment.

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## 11.0 Appendices

### Appendix A – Interview Questions

These semi-structured interview questions will be used to gather insights from three participants: a sole trader, a sneaker enthusiast, and a barbershop owner.

#### Sole Trader Questions

1. You've been running your business for over 30 years — what do you think has helped you stay successful for so long?
2. What makes your customers come back to you again and again?
3. You've never really used formal advertising or social media, yet your business has grown. How do you think you've built that kind of loyal customer base without it?
4. Have you noticed any changes in what customers expect from you over the years? How have you adapted?
5. In a market where new businesses come and go, how do you think you've kept customers choosing you over competitors?
6. Have you ever considered offering extra services or partnering with another business to provide more value to your customers?
7. Even though you've done well without it, do you think businesses today need a social media presence or online marketing to survive?
8. What advice would you give to someone like me starting a niche service business about how to build customer loyalty and grow over time?

## **Barbershop Owner Questions**

1. What originally made you want to become a barber and start working in the industry?
2. Was it always a passion, or would you say it was more so a skill you thought you could get good at?
3. Did you start with formal training, or did you learn on the job?
4. What's your favourite part about the job or running your own barbershop?
5. Do you currently use a booking system, or do you still take in walk-ins?
6. Have you noticed any challenges or benefits from using a booking system?
7. Have you heard of BareSpace (a barber-focused booking platform)? Do you use it or another system? Which do you think works best for small barbershops?
8. Would you ever consider offering drop-off services like sneaker cleaning inside your barbershop? Why or why not?
9. What makes your customers come back to you regularly—quality, price, atmosphere, or something else?
10. Do you use loyalty cards or referral offers? Would you consider them?
11. How do you use social media for marketing—what platforms work best for you?
12. Would you ever integrate other services, such as a coffee shop or tattoo parlour, within your barbershop?
13. What key skills do you think are most important for barbers today?
14. How do you handle slow days or gaps in bookings?
15. How do you set your prices—based on competitors, business costs, or personal judgment?
16. Do you ask customers for feedback or reviews? Does that help with improving service or building trust?
17. Where do you see your business in the next 3 to 5 years?

## Sneaker Enthusiast Questions

1. How long have you been into sneakers?
2. Would you describe yourself as a collector, reseller, or just someone who likes keeping sneakers clean?
3. What makes you want to take care of your sneakers — money, sentimental value, or just looking fresh?
4. Do you resell sneakers or mainly keep them for personal use?
5. Have you used professional sneaker cleaning services before? How was your experience?
6. What would make you come back regularly for sneaker cleaning—price, quality, convenience, speed, or customer service?
7. Would loyalty programs or discounts encourage you to use cleaning services more often?
8. Would you use sneaker cleaning drop-off points at a barbershop, gym, or store? Why or why not?
9. Do you ever enter sneaker raffles on apps like Nike SNKRS? Do you buy or sell on resale platforms like StockX or GOAT?
10. Do you think sneaker cleaning services are useful for people trying to resell worn or deadstock sneakers?
11. Does sustainability matter to you when it comes to sneaker cleaning products or services?
12. Would you prefer to book sneaker cleaning through Instagram/WhatsApp or via a proper online booking system?
13. Do you ever choose sneaker cleaning services based on what you see on Instagram or TikTok?
14. How much would you realistically pay for professional sneaker cleaning? Does price impact your decision?
15. Would you recommend Revive Our Kicks to others if you had a good experience?
16. Any ideas for improving sneaker cleaning services?
17. Would you ever sell your sneakers to a sneaker cleaner or reseller instead of using resale platforms?

# Appendix B - Participant Information Sheet

## Participant Information Sheet

### **Title of Research:**

*Revive Our Kicks – Leveraging Sustainability and Integrated Services to Enhance Retention and Profitability in Irish Startups*

### **Researcher:**

Aaron Keddy (National College of Ireland)

### **Purpose of the Research:**

This research is part of my final year dissertation for my Business degree at the National College of Ireland. The aim is to explore how small businesses, like Revive Our Kicks, can improve customer retention and business growth through sustainability practices and integrated service models.

### **What Participation Involves:**

You are being invited to take part in a short, semi-structured interview which will last approximately 20 to 30 minutes. The interview will involve questions about your experience with small businesses, customer loyalty, service expectations, and business strategies.

### **Confidentiality:**

All responses will remain confidential and anonymous. Your name or any identifying details will not appear in the dissertation. Audio recordings will be used for transcription purposes only and securely stored.

### **Voluntary Participation:**

Taking part in this research is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time without giving a reason, and you may skip any question you do not wish to answer.

### **Data Storage:**

Audio recordings and transcripts will be securely stored on a password-protected computer and external USB device, as per NCI data protection guidelines.

### **Contact Details:**

If you have any questions, please contact:

Aaron Keddy

National College of Ireland

x21330376@student.ncirl.ie

# Appendix C - Participant Consent Form

## Participant Consent Form

**Research Title:**

*Revive Our Kicks – Leveraging Sustainability and Integrated Services to Enhance Retention and Profitability in Irish Startups*

**Researcher:**

Aaron Keddy

**Institution:**

National College of Ireland

## Participant Agreement

I confirm that I have been informed about the nature and purpose of this research study being conducted by Aaron Keddy as part of his final year dissertation at the National College of Ireland.

I understand the following:

- **Voluntary Participation:**  
My participation is entirely voluntary. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:**  
All information I provide will be kept confidential and will remain anonymous in any reports or publications arising from the research.
- **Use of Data:**  
The data collected during this study will be used solely for academic purposes related to this dissertation.
- **Right to Refuse Questions:**  
I have the right to decline to answer any specific questions if I do not feel comfortable doing so.

By signing below, I confirm that I give my informed consent to participate in this interview.

**Participant Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_